Why is China Building Up its Nuclear Forces? Does it Matter for U.S. Policy?

[00:00:00] Speaker 1: You know, for the longest, for most of the nuclear age, we've really been talking about two nuclear powers, the Soviet Union and the United States, and here we have the emergence of a third with China. So we have three wonderful panelists. Really it's hard to imagine three better people to talk about these issues. I'd like to start with Dr. Mastro on the end. As a preeminent analyst of Chinese military policy, can you shed some light on what Beijing is doing through its modernization, and how might these enhanced capabilities influence China's nuclear posture or their role within the broader military strategy for China?

[00:00:50] Speaker 2: Well, thank you for the question. And before I answer it, I'd just like to be very open about where my biases lie when it comes to assessing the challenges of China. If anyone has read my work on China, you would know that no one would really call me a China dove. I write very extensively about the prospect and threat of hot war with China, how we have conflicting interests that are irreconcilable, and I want you to have that in mind when I tell you that I am not worried about the Chinese nuclear buildup, and I am a minority voice, I would say, in U.S. government circles that I speak to about the buildup, and I'll lay out why I think China's doing it and what it means for their future strategy. But I just wanted to be clear that this opinion of mine is not just a continuation of all opinions in which I give China the benefit of the doubt. I tend not to do that, and I'm not doing it here. In my view, China is very clearly, in this case, responding to the United States. And again, I'm very wary of saying this, because the Chinese government will always blame something the United States does and say that they're reacting to it. Most of the time, that's not true. Most of the time, they have a strategy in place, and they just do that for legitimacy purposes. But when I look at China's nuclear strategy over the course of the past 70 years, it's somewhat unique. They have looked at nuclear weapons differently than the United States in every possible area. Force posture, doctrine, readiness, delivery systems, organizational structure, everything has been different. And it's the one area of military strategy that hasn't really changed since 1964. So for me, when I look at the buildup, and I'm looking at it in the context of all the different capabilities, for example, enhancements in space assets, it seems to me that a couple of years ago, there started to be a discussion in the United States that because we were having issues on the conventional side, maybe we could use our nuclear dominance to our advantage. And the Chinese heard that debate in the United States, and in my mind, there were concerns that the minimal deterrent that China has, so that's their nuclear doctrine. They just feel like they need to have enough nuclear weapons to deter the United States from attacking their nuclear arsenal enough to be able to hold the United States at risk that maybe what they had was not enough. So when I look at the capability side, and I generally focus a lot, I'm obviously here in my civilian capacity, but in my other capacities in the military and such, I focus very clearly on military capabilities. To me, it still corresponds with a minimal retaliatory capability. Now what does this mean for their strategy? First let me say, I think I'm right about everything I just told you. But as a good strategist, I want to throw out some alternatives, and the things that I'm looking for, if those alternatives are actually correct. The first thing is, China usually changes doctrine first, and then force posture. So every service we've seen, we see changes in how they talk about the use of force, the role of those capabilities in warfare, and then later we see the buildup. So 15, 20 years ago, they talk about how they want C4ISR capabilities, or command, control, communication computers, intelligence,

surveillance, and reconnaissance. They wanted a space architecture. They do the doctrine, space is the ultimate high ground. People like me, when I was early in my career, wasted weeks of my life translating that stuff for the Department of Defense. They write that first, and then the space architecture comes later. When I look at the nuclear side, that's what I see sort of happening, and because they haven't changed their doctrine yet, I think this corresponds with that doctrine. Maybe the nuclear realm is unique in so many ways. Like I said, they haven't changed since 1964. Maybe I'm wrong, and this is one area where posture comes first, doctrine comes second. The second out of two things I could possibly be right about, if this is driven by irrational thought, so Xi Jinping just wants more nuclear weapons because they're cool, and men want more toys to play with, then that could be a problem. If that's the only reason for the buildup, it's not really corresponding with any strategic thinking, I can't be 100% certain that's not the case. It does seem, in other areas of competition I've looked at, that the Chinese are pretty strategic even with Xi Jinping at the helm, and they tend not to fall for those prestige types of arguments. There's one or two cases where they have fallen for them, so maybe this is an area where he's like, I just want more, and then he'll feel more confident having more, even though strategically that doesn't make any sense. In which case, what does it mean for the future if Xi Jinping has more confidence because he has more nuclear weapons, maybe he will be more aggressive. I think that largely depends on how we react. If the debate in the United States is like, oh, crap, they have more nuclear weapons, and now I'm so afraid, and now I don't want to do anything, and now I don't know if I should respond to anything China does, the Chinese see that, and then they're like, oh, maybe we have a little bit more leverage with these nuclear weapons. If instead we say strategically, listen, whether or not the United States has 10 times more nuclear weapons than China or five makes no strategic difference, and we move on with our lives and get over this debate, I think it won't have any strategic difference. The last thing I will say is China could easily complicate all of our lives, not by building one more nuclear weapon, but by just changing their doctrine. The Chinese leadership has never said, United States, if you intervene in Taiwan, we will consider using nuclear weapons against you. They didn't say it when they were conventionally inferior in the 1990s and had no hope of winning a war over Taiwan. They didn't say it in the 2000s. Now that we're in the position that they have the conventional capability possibly to do this, why would they all of a sudden threaten this? In my mind, before we worry about a Chinese buildup, a change in doctrine, we just have to be honest that all that takes is one statement today, and it complicates all of our planning. To me, it's very credible that China still has the same doctrine. They just feel like they need more nuclear weapons to adhere to it.

[00:07:09] Speaker 1: Thank you. Building off of that, Dr. Zhao, based on your recent Carnegie report dealing with the political drivers behind China's nuclear modernization, how do you think the West understands and perhaps more importantly misunderstands China's objectives with its nuclear buildup?

[00:07:29] Speaker 3: Well, thank you. I agree with Arianna that trying to build a more robust second strike is part of China's incentive. But as I tried to explain in the report last year, I think there is a more salient driver, which is the political leadership's intuitive belief that a larger and greater nuclear capability would somehow translate into broad coercive leverage and help soften America's overall approach towards China. And the point I wanted to make in that report is I think recent China's nuclear decision-making mechanism has been more chaotic and less

coherent than most people assume, especially under Mr. Xi, who has really concentrated power under himself in recent years, demanding absolute loyalty. And it's also the decision to expedite nuclear development was made at a time when the PLA was undergoing one of the most radical military reform in many years. The process of that comprehensive restructuring of the PLA was much more disruptive than the current American military reform pushed top-down by Trump administration. I think after my American colleagues watching Trump administration for three months, you probably would be in a better position to appreciate my description of the chaotic and less coherent nuclear decision-making process in the Chinese system. And as countries like China who watch and consider how to react to a decision-making style demonstrated by leaders like Mr. Trump, I think a similar lesson can be learned, which is you don't have to match every move of your rival because of the internal chaos and the lack of coherent thinking. Some elements of China's nuclear program certainly is aimed at achieving specific military goals, like China's increasing interest in escalation management capabilities supported by theater-range precision nuclear-capable systems. Other elements of it, like the fast expansion of silo-based ICBM, they are not necessarily supported by a well-thought-out military objective. So you don't have to match every move. In fact, it's actually time for other countries to stay calm and really try to understand what's American security interest. And avoid moves like Ariana just warned us that might actually encourage China to move in a direction to adopt a much more destabilizing nuclear posture. I don't think China has made a decision to transform its nuclear employment doctrine from primarily deterrence towards nuclear first use, nuclear war fighting doctrine, but China could. And how U.S. and other countries decide to react to China will play a role in influencing China's future choice. And a quick comment I want to add to that is a key, I think, misperception on the American side is how the U.S. conducts threat assessment regarding China's nuclear buildup. I think if you read China's nuclear doctrinal writings carefully, clearly, China, when it comes to nuclear deterrence, it's mostly about nuclear signaling. It's mostly about posturing, how to maximize the coercive benefits of nuclear weapons without having to use it. So I think that actually the focus should be on how to counter deliberate efforts to manipulate nuclear threats. But in fact, the American discussion here, as far as I understand it, is really focused on how to counter Chinese nuclear war fighting, both at the strategic level and at the theater level. But again, if you look at China's internal discussion, they see American nuclear capability, the current U.S. capability, both at the strategic and theater level as very formidable. In fact, their increasing interest in escalation management capability is a reaction to perceived American interest in fighting limited nuclear warfare because of declining American conventional military superiority. So it's a reaction to perceived American assertive nuclear policy. I think that's Chinese misperception. But again, that is what is driving part of China's nuclear buildup. So the current U.S. obsession with building up American theater nuclear weapons, in this case, to counter something that China didn't see as a U.S. vulnerability. I think that's misplacing the focus. Instead, if you look at China's discussion, they are almost openly laughing at American lack of capability in conventional precision strike capabilities, drones technologies, et cetera. So U.S., I think, is making a poor choice of investing precious resources into areas where China don't see a U.S. capability gap, and actually crowding out resources in areas where China does see a serious U.S. capability gap. So I think for the U.S., one important point is how to build up the U.S. capability to accurately assess Chinese thinking and intent. Because I think China, the U.S. no longer has the luxury to do everything, to easily overcompete China and invest in every area of military

significance. That's no longer within U.S. capacity. In fact, China has a much greater confidence today that it can outcompete United States in selected areas. So U.S. can no longer afford basing its countermeasures on worst-case scenario thinking. It has to strive to more accurately assess China's thinking. So that's, I think, important to consider.

[00:15:21] Speaker 1: Should tell President Trump that we can't compete in every area with China. Hey, so Professor Mukai, in your recent report on China's nuclear modernization and its implications for Japan, you mentioned that Tokyo is increasingly concerned about China's potential use of nuclear weapons, even if it's not directed at Japan. Could you elaborate on what specific aspects of China's nuclear modernization are most worrying for Japan? And how these concerns are influencing Japanese defensive policy and the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence?

[00:16:03] Speaker 4: So thank you very much for the question, and I would first like to thank Carnegie for having me on this panel. To start with, I would sort of second what Oriana just mentioned. Although we do see the modernization, we call it the modernization of China's nuclear program, I think this modernization has been a continued activity ever since China detonated its first nuclear device in the 1960s. So whether the level of sophistication was low back then and high right now, the modernization has been continuing ever since. So in that sense, as the Japanese government officially says that China is a serious concern, I think it has long been a potential threat throughout decades now. And so it's not something that popped up recently. It's just more of a thing that we have been living with for decades and decades now. But having said so, I think the opaqueness and the vagueness of its intention on why they are actually doing this kind of activity, why are they continuing to modernize their nuclear arsenal, I think that is a more worrisome point for Tokyo. Because we don't really understand, we still don't understand what the hidden intentions are, what the hidden messages are in terms of China's activity. And so Oriana sort of mentioned that, and Tong also mentioned from a different perspective on how China perceives this military buildup. But from Tokyo's perspective, we still don't really get what China is really thinking about in terms of its buildup. But having said so, Tokyo, in Japan, we have to be prepared for the worst-case scenario. And so what we are trying to do is trying to reinforce our deterrent mechanism in the alliance with the United States, but also more of an individual sort of deterrent for the Japanese side as well. So if some of you may recall, we have actually changed our strategic documents in 2022 in order for us to sort of step up our game in the deterrent arena. We're trying to increase our budget from 1% to 2% of our GDP, and that would be a five-year project now going on from 2023 to 2027. So we're in the middle of the process right now. And so with that, we are also trying to reinforce our conventional capability. And so that would be, I think, the biggest challenge for the current Japanese government and the current Japanese society as a whole. And I'll stop here.

[00:19:19] Speaker 1: So one of the rare windows that the United States has seen for a possibility for success diplomatically with China has been this, you know, no first use option that they've floated to us in various different public arenas. And I know Mallory Stewart was here, maybe still is, and she spent some time on this issue last November, November before that. And it didn't bear any fruit. But, you know, what I'm interested in is, why would China bring this up if they're not interested in engaging on this in a meaningful way? You know, why draw attention to this, their

policy, if they didn't, especially in the background of this buildup that we're seeing and all the questions that are being asked about it. You know, what do you think this overture is all about? You know, what do you think China's doing with this, Dr. Mastrom?

[00:20:30] Speaker 2: So, you know, for me, the Chinese no first use policy is very credible. You know, it's the United States that doesn't embrace a no first use or nuclear weapons sole purpose type of doctrine. And, you know, I have been briefed at many times before. It's so that we have the flexibility mainly to deal with chem and bio. But I think in any context that the Chinese bring it up, I think it's largely because in most areas of security and military policy, the Chinese do not have the legitimate upper hand. But in this one, they have tended historically to be much more reasonable about nuclear weapons than the United States has. And in some cases, like with North Korea, for example, or sort of rogue nuclear powers, the Chinese would argue that, you know, if the United States didn't present this huge threat to these countries, they wouldn't feel the need to develop nuclear weapons. And so it's kind of like a PR win in a lot of cases when the Chinese just like to highlight the differences of like, well, you know, we don't, we have a position in which we won't use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states, you know, developing world, everyone else. Do you like that? Oh, you like that? You know what the United States position is, that they can do whatever they want. So I think it does help on the legitimacy side. I will just say from a forced posture perspective, until recently, every aspect of their forced posture really supported this no first use policy. I mean, the United States, when we developed nuclear weapons, the first thing we did was to develop the space architecture for early warning, right, to be able to see if missiles were incoming. The Chinese didn't do that because they're like, well, we'll know they're incoming when things blow up and then we have to respond. So there is some discussion now about some initial satellites that have been put into place for early warning. What does that mean type of thing? And we can have that discussion. But I, you know, I go back to Tong Zhao's point that China has the upper hand on the legitimacy side of nuclear forced posture, largely speaking. And the United States, we spent more on nuclear weapons than China spent on their whole military until the mid 2000s. And, you know, I have been called shrill on this issue. So I will continue to be shrill on it. I mean, the lack of conventional long range precision strike that the United States has, and in particular, intermediate range ballistic missiles, is like unfathomable. It's unfathomable. And that would change the strategic calculus so much more than more nuclear weapons. So I just find it so interesting that Americans in the same breath can be like, hey, Rihanna, remember that Soviet, that Cold War that we won because we convinced the Soviet Union to spend money on stupid stuff. Anyway, second breath, you know what I think we need to do is build so much more nuclear weapons because of what the Chinese are doing. And I'm like, aren't we the Soviet Union in that scenario?

[00:23:17] Speaker 1: Well, we're very good at building stupid stuff.

[00:23:19] Speaker 2: Right. So I'm trying to make sure we don't build the stuff that doesn't have the impact. But I think generally speaking, the Chinese position on arms control is we're not willing to engage in it until the United States has a more reasonable nuclear posture and or fewer nuclear weapons. We do have space for discussions. We've had, I think, a lot of success on AI incorporation or the lack thereof in nuclear command and control. The Chinese, in my discussions with the Chinese, they haven't decided who gets the advantage with AI. They're like, oh, does

that mean the US military is going to be stronger or we're going to be stronger? So there's a lot more space, I think, for discussions in that realm. And generally speaking, the Chinese are more open to restrictions or discussions on technologies that they haven't incorporated into their military yet. But, you know, at least to date, I have found their no first use doctrine really compelling. And I understand because of extended deterrence reasons. So I don't want to make our Japanese friends panic too much that that's not really on the table for the United States. We have different considerations because of extended deterrence that makes things more complicated. But in my mind, that's largely why the Chinese bring it up to begin with.

[00:24:28] Speaker 1: Tom, what do you think? I mean, do you think that this is a good faith effort to begin some sort of meaningful arms control diplomacy?

[00:24:38] Speaker 3: I think it's both. Of course, this is a diplomatic move to reduce international pressure on China to join more substantive nuclear arms control talks. This is presented basically as China's counterproposal to the arms control proposals from the United States and other countries. So for the U.S. to not respond to it actually makes it easier for China to reject American proposals on nuclear arms control. But on the other hand, I think it's also a reflection of genuine Chinese belief that no first use is a very helpful step towards reducing the salience of nuclear weapons and towards arms control and eventually disarmament. And I think China until today still genuinely believes in at least the military significance of no first use for China's interests. Again, to follow China's internal discussion, they still see U.S. as possessing superior nuclear capability at both theater and strategic levels. It makes little military sense for China to be the first to escalate a conventional war to the nuclear level. So they genuinely don't appreciate the necessity for nuclear first use. And I think this is less appreciated by many other countries. As Ariana mentioned, if China follows the Russian example and declares a nuclear first use policy of openly threatening nuclear first use against a wide range of conventional military contingencies, that would be hugely more destabilizing. So it should be in our collective interest to maintain the Chinese declaratory policy of no first use. It still makes China harder to threaten nuclear use in a conventional conflict, and that's important. As I said, the greatest threat is deliberate manipulating nuclear risk by threatening nuclear first use. And the no first use commitment makes that harder. And I do think we can use China's no first use promotion effort as a dialogue opener. I think despite Ariana's trust in China's credibility in no first use, I think there's widespread suspicion in D.C. about it. As China's arsenal grows, the question only increases how China's much larger and more diverse nuclear arsenal is still consistent with an unconditional no first use policy. And naturally, I think China also has suspicion about American credibility if U.S. was to declare a no first use. This was reflected when China was reacting to previous Obama and Biden discussion in American no first use and sole purpose policy. So naturally, they could have a general discussion without specifying countries about how to measure the credibility of a country's no first use commitment. Can they come up with a common set of standards for a credible no first use? And then to address Japan's concern, it's really important to use no first use discussion to highlight this issue of conventional nuclear linkage because U.S. faces genuine allies, opposition against no first use because they worry U.S.-China no first use commitment would embolden Chinese conventional aggression. So that affects Japan's interest directly. So this is a legitimate question for China, and it would help encourage China to consider how China can do to alleviate regional countries' conventional concern about China's

military behavior and what conventional security assurance China can provide to regional countries so that they would reduce their opposition towards American no first use. So that's, I think, the constructive way to structure a no first use dialogue. Again, you don't have to aim at achieving a U.S.-China no first use agreement. The aim is to use this topic as a dialogue opener to have a deeper discussion comprehensively about U.S.-China nuclear relationship.

[00:29:43] Speaker 1: So we have a question from the crowd. Could China's buildup push regional actors like Japan or South Korea to reconsider their non-nuclear status, and how should U.S. policy prepare for that possibility? Professor Mukai.

[00:30:03] Speaker 4: Thank you.

[00:30:04] Speaker 1: If you just want to stick with the Japan part of it, that's okay.

[00:30:08] Speaker 4: I can't speak on behalf of the Koreans, but sticking to the Japanese. And let me remind first that people tend to talk about South Korea and Japan as they were really similar actors in the security arena, but we actually have quite a bit difference in terms of how we perceive threats, how we try to strengthen our deterrence capabilities. And so with that, I would go to the Japanese part. The short answer would probably be no. I would say that Japan first would not consider, of course, going nuclear. That would probably be one of the things that people are very concerned about. Would Japan go nuclear or not if things deteriorate? We do have a strong alliance mechanism with the United States, and not just the nuclear side, but deterrence is, as some of the panelists in previous sessions have already mentioned, that deterrence is not just about nuclear. It's about, as Ton also mentioned, about the combination of conventional and nuclear. And so I think that Japan will probably have to step up its game in this deterrent mechanism, trying to figure out how it can contribute more to the alliance in terms of the conventional side, but I think the way that Japan looks at the nuclear element, I think, would not change.

[00:31:48] Speaker 1: Another question, Lindsey Ran asks, if China's nuclear modernization is primarily aimed at signaling the credibility and survivability of its second strike capability, rather than achieving strategic parity with the U.S., what specific force structure or posture indicators should we look at for signs of such an intent, and which developments might serve as grounds for reassurance? Tong, do you want to take that one?

[00:32:18] Speaker 3: Well, I think to strengthen second strike is only part of the incentive, and I think if you look at other elements of the expansion program, they don't really contribute to second strike in the most cost-effective way, especially if you look at China's longstanding concern about American homeland missile defense as posing the greatest threat to China's second strike. It doesn't really make much sense to invest so much on large scale of saddle-based ICBM capability. That's not the most cost-effective way to deal with a missile defense threat. And as I argued in the report, I think it actually reflects the political leadership's sense of urgency to build and demonstrate stronger strategic capability, including nuclear weapons. And somehow, Mr. Xi and the Chinese leadership think that that greater strategic capability would register in Washington and other Western capitals when they draft their China policy. They would be more cautious in trying to contain China and destabilize China and threaten China's core national interests. That logic, why a

larger nuclear arsenal can naturally translate into broader leverage and influence U.S. and Western allies' overall approach towards China is never scrutinized. In the Chinese expert community, there is not much input from the Chinese experts on examining the underlying logic. But because of the nature of the system, this is how decision was made and then quickly implemented by the military and defense industry, who were very happy with the more resources and money. And I would argue the focus on large-scale sites of saddle-based ICBMs reflects this sense of urgency. When leadership in Beijing thought China was facing unprecedented threats from Western countries, there was reported memo from China's State Security Ministry think tank in early 2020s that China was facing the most dire external environment since the Tiananmen Square incident. I think that sense of urgency to address a perceived existential threat made Chinese leaders to really invest in ICBM silos that, because of China's unique advantage in large-scale infrastructure building, China can quickly expand its strategic nuclear arsenal in a very short time. But as this secretive decision-making process tends to produce less internal checks and balances, less oversight, we saw problems with the quality of the construction of the nuclear projects. But even more importantly, that should give us pause about the quality of China's strategic thinking that underlines its nuclear expansion. That's something I think haven't received enough attention and discussion here.

[00:36:19] Speaker 2: If I could just add some specifics, like what I'm looking for. Like, if they're going for strategic parity, right now the Strategic Rocket Force only has counter-strike campaigns. So I would like to see, like, there be some sort of writing of different types of campaigns that are beyond nuclear signaling or responding to a strike. I would see them exercising more launch on warning versus launch on attack. I think I would see more readiness in their current nuclear systems. Like, nothing they have is deployed or deployable by START Treaty standards. It's all on pretty low readiness. Early warning, collaboration with the Russians, capacity of nuclear material. I think right now, like, what you see in the open source of what they're capable of producing for nuclear weapons doesn't give you the sense that they're going for strategic parity. And then aspects of their nuclear doctrine. For example, you know, getting more of the submarine-launched ballistic missiles, more deterrence patrols for the submarines. We've also never seen a pairing of air-launched on bombers before. The H-6, we've never actually seen them being nuclear-capable. So those would be some of the more specific things that I would look for. And I'll just note the ICBM. It's possible that that buildup part of the concern is China has no conventional capability against the U.S. homeland, which means they're missing a rung in that escalation ladder while the United States has the capability to strike China with conventional munitions. So there is an open question of whether that ICBM buildup is actually for the nuclear modernization at all or are the Chinese interested in a conventional capability against the United States, which I think would actually be more strategically impactful than if it were for nuclear use.

[00:38:03] Speaker 1: As long as they're not full with water.

[00:38:07] Speaker 2: But we won't know they are if they're heading towards us, so I don't know. Maybe it's still a problem.

[00:38:12] Speaker 1: George Perkovich has a question that I have as well, which is, I'm going to build on it, so I'm going to play a little jazz with it, George, please. So what do we know about how President Xi feels about nuclear weapons? It seems to

be largely a black box there. And if President Xi did issue public statements about nuclear weapons at length, do you think the United States would believe what he says?

[00:38:47] Speaker 3: Well, one quick point is Mr. Xi in an internal meeting with senior leaders from the then Second Artillery, now Rocket Force, shortly after he came to power, and he mentioned that, look at the Russian example. Russia made the right decision to maintain a large nuclear arsenal despite the economic challenges facing Russia after the end of the Cold War. So that comment and the implication that somehow Russia, by maintaining a large arsenal, made Western countries better respect Russian core national interests. I think that's a very interesting data point about Xi's personal thinking about the broader role of nuclear weapons.

[00:39:40] Speaker 2: If I could just add that, you know, Taylor Fravel at MIT wrote a great book on Chinese military strategy called Active Defense, in which he shows that the nuclear area is one in which, actually, that's like direct leadership decision-making when it comes to doctrine and forced posture, and all other areas in the conventional realm is actually much more directed by the PLA. So that's just to say, like, that's a good question, George. We should know that because it determines it more than any other area. Do we believe Xi Jinping? You know, my main job in life is to tell people what the Chinese say that they actually mean and what the Chinese say that they don't mean, and I look at the direction of bias. So an easy way, this isn't the case with all things, but if he is saying things that we do not like, you know, and that it's, like, problematic that he's saying them and creates some sort of costs associated with saying them, and we wish he believed something different, you know, that tends to be the truth. And generally speaking, he's been in power now for, like, 12 years. If you look at the things he said in 2013, in which he was like, this is what I'm going to do by 2015, this is what I'm going to do by 2018, like, all those things came to fruition. So I'm generally on the side of, like, you know, I believe what Chinese leadership has to say, especially when it's stuff that we don't want to hear. So if Xi Jinping came out and he was like, I want as many nuclear weapons as the United States, I'd be like, okay, I believe you. If he comes out and he's like, you know, you have nothing to worry about. China has always been a peaceful nation in which we've never attacked any of our neighbors. I'm like, oh, let me take a look. And then I look not only at the rhetoric, but behavior and capabilities to see whether or not I believe what's being said.

[00:41:24] Speaker 1: Celia McDowell has a question. What are the implications of China's nuclear buildup for U.S. strategic relations in the Pacific? And what will the role be of the United States and its allies to manage any emerging threats in the region? Professor McKay, you want to take a crack at that?

[00:41:44] Speaker 4: Okay. So I think the deterrence mechanism, as I always go back to, serves the foundation of how we engage with China. And so, for example, for Japan and the United States, we do have the extended deterrence dialogue going on, which is that we talk about how to manage this deterrence mechanism, not only from the nuclear side, but also from the conventional side. And now we have this sort of tabletop exercise going on as well. I think that it is important for both countries and also the other alliances, allied countries as well, to really step into the discussions further on and give out there what they want to, for example, what Japan wants from the U.S., what the U.S. requires for Japan. I think those kind of in-depth

discussions are yet to be done. I mean, it's still on the progress. I think it has to be more in-depth discussions. And I think that is one of the ways in which I think the United States can also reassure these countries that the United States is there, the presence is there.

[00:43:10] Speaker 3: And if I may quickly build upon that, I think also we can have a parallel discussion with China because when U.S. and allies strengthen deterrence relationship, how China would perceive that and react is also important in shaping the outcome of the deterrent effort. And I think China has been very critical of extended deterrence, has been really challenging and questioning U.S. alliance security arrangement in the region because we never really pushed China to actually shoulder the responsibility to provide a constructive security order. So it allows China to just raise questions and challenging and be disruptive, but never come up with a more constructive alternative, at least to provide its own vision and have it debated and discussed. And I think now when the U.S. commitment to the region appears, well, commitment to allies' interest appears to be declining somewhat. U.S. is committed to preserving its own military superiority, but not necessarily as strongly as before to allies' own interest, including Taiwan and other places, including deterring North Korea's nuclear program and security implications for allies of friendly countries. This is causing U.S. allies to pursue other options. I think it's time to give China space to seriously consider, because Beijing is always saying it's Asians that should be responsible for Asian security. So now let's place China in that position of being the major power actually responsible for providing stable security order in the region that is on its own doorstep and make China be responsible for dealing with the consequences of North Korean provocations, making Japan and South Korea feel safe enough that they wouldn't go nuclear. And in this effort, I think Japan and other U.S. allies should be the interlocutor to Beijing, presenting your cases of security concerns and not to make the United States the main interlocutor, but present your cases directly to Beijing and let Beijing appreciate the legitimate security concerns and push China to come up with your alternative constructive option of how do you envision a stable regional security order. I think somehow that dialogue really needs to start, and this is, I think, an opportunity. When China's overall policy is to further isolate the United States, but at the same time engage with U.S. allies and friends to separate and undermine the overall Western bloc. So U.S. allies' voices and concerns increasingly matter to China, and China has to and has a will to engage with the concerns expressed by U.S. allies. So I think at the same time, you can have a separate discussion with China and push China to think more constructively about preserving regional peace and order.

[00:47:16] Speaker 4: Please. So I think that goes back to the whole intention part that we started up our discussion. So we don't really know what the intentions are, but if you flip the coin, China does not really understand either. It doesn't really see what our intentions are, too. So I think the diplomatic channel, the diplomatic dialogues, that bilateral talks are becoming increasingly important nowadays.

[00:47:49] Speaker 1: Golden Dome. Do you think that – this is from Victoria Sampson. Do you think that Trump's idea for Golden Dome, and this seems to – it really does seem to have rippled through the defense community as well as the primes. Well, they see it as a gold rush, of course, but do you think that this sort of missile defense system, as described, land-based, space-based, do you think this changes China's calculus in any way? Do you think it plays any role?

[00:48:35] Speaker 2: I mean, I feel like it's dangerous territory to say it plays zero role, though that's kind of like my inclination. I mean, I'm sure there's some –

[00:48:44] Speaker 1: That's the opposite of shrill.

[00:48:45] Speaker 2: I'm sure there's some alternative universe in which this matters. I mean, I would literally – if you could – if we had any means of protecting our bases in the Indo-Pacific, that would be like a million times more impactful. Like, if we're in a nuclear exchange, the United States does not have the resolve to fight a nuclear war with China. I mean, what is this scenario in which we're fighting a nuclear war with China? Only if it's like World War III, they've literally killed hundreds of thousands of Americans. The Chinese want us out of Asia, I think, before we get to a nuclear level. Like, the United States taps out. So, like, describe to me this scenario. Like, Golden Dome, too, any of those missile defenses can be saturated, and I think the Chinese have always been right that a minimal retaliatory capability of, like, you just get one into Los Angeles, that's it, right? So, for me, the big issue right now is the lower rungs of the ladder, which is the United States has no ability to defend any of our fixed bases in the first island chain. So, deal with that. So, when Golden Dome is first announced, I was like, oh, does this mean we're going to defend – can we defend Kadena? Oh, we still can't? Well, then, I mean, I don't care. I mean, that's basically – you know, put that on Kadena. Sure, we have a different discussion. But until then, I think the fact the Chinese, all that we'll do is convince them they need more nuclear weapons to then offset that capability. So, maybe if you come to me and you say, okay, I don't think it makes any strategic difference but we can get the Chinese to spend on stupid stuff, I would say yes, but they're still spending such a small percentage of their GDP on their military, and they have relied mainly on land-based systems, which tend to be cheaper in terms of delivering payloads than advanced aircraft or submarines or stuff. I still think they can do the conventional and the nuclear at the same time, so it's not going to solve that problem for us either. But as long as the rationale is like, I want the Chinese to spend more money, but then are we all okay with – but then we see the panic when the more money is the Chinese, there's more nuclear weapons. So, I leave that to the senior leaders to decide, but I don't think it actually changes Chinese strategic calculus about some of the scenarios that I spend a lot of time thinking about.

[00:50:57] Speaker 1: Something tells me if we put missile defense on Kadena and call it Golden Dome, it won't have the same sort of appeal to Trump.

[00:51:05] Speaker 3: Did you want to weigh in on that? So far, Beijing's reaction to Golden Dome is quite calm because they understand there's a lot of exaggeration in expectations and much of the program may not materialize at all eventually. We don't see China feel desperate to take countermeasures. It is waiting to wait and see. But more importantly, when it talks about make the enemy do the stupid stuff, I think China was perhaps happy to see the U.S. reacting by investing dearly into Golden Dome as U.S. doing the stupid stuff. It may not be a deliberate Chinese strategy, but by having a limited capability to strike U.S. homelands, either at the nuclear or conventional level, because they reported Chinese development of a conventional ICBM is part of the driver of the Golden Dome. By even having a limited capability to threaten U.S. homelands, China was able to conduct the cost imposition strategy on the United States. And when it comes to making the enemy become bankrupt in investing in hugely costly asymmetric countermeasures, I think China wonders if it's

the United States that will actually repeat the tragic history of the Soviet Union making itself bankrupt. That's why I think China now is actually reacting very calmly.

[00:53:05] Speaker 1: Well, Congress hasn't allocated any money to Golden Dome yet, so we'll see how really stupid it is. We have about two minutes left here. What are the prospects of any meaningful headway with China on arms control? I mentioned Mallory Stewart before, and they have been alerting us on missile launches. There have been these little glimmers of hope, and the no first use is still out there. What are the prospects that you see a path forward on arms control with China? Should Russia be part of that, or should these be separate roads on which we proceed to get something done?

[00:53:59] Speaker 2: I'll say I've been arguing for a nontraditional approach to arms control. For this audience that's primarily concerned about nuclear arms control, this isn't what you're asking and this isn't what you want to hear, but I really think that the United States, there might be a possibility that we could engage in arms control which the United States is willing to reduce some of our nuclear capability in response to limitations and constraints on Chinese conventional strike. When I say that to some audiences or some generals and admirals, they're like, that's an insane idea. But I ask very specifically, would you give up 500 nuclear weapons if China didn't have a DF-21D? 100% yes. Well, then it doesn't seem so stupid. I think the Chinese are very concerned, and maybe to a degree, and Tong Zhao can talk about this, about the US nuclear dominance. They're concerned about their second strike, and the perceptions go in our favor on the nuclear side that maybe we have some hope of getting them to pull back a little on the conventional side, at the very least, to give us more space to maneuver there. So I don't see any hope on the like, China, you give up some nuclear weapons, we'll give up nuclear weapons kind of traditional side, but I think we can try to limit their military, their ability to achieve aims with military force, in particular in the region, if we think more expansively about what arms control means.

[00:55:21] Speaker 1: Russia.

[00:55:22] Speaker 2: I punt that every time. I'm not a Russia expert, so it's hard for me to say. I had a meeting with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs once, and I made this argument, and he was like, what about Russia? And I was like, not my lane, sir, which was not satisfying to him either.

[00:55:35] Speaker 1: If it worked for him, it'll work for me.

[00:55:37] Speaker 2: Tong?

[00:55:38] Speaker 3: Well, I think it's really hard to make US-Russia-China trilateral arms control work, but alternatively, we can consider another type of trilateral nuclear arms control talk, which would be between China, UK, and France. They are so-called second-tier nuclear powers in terms of capabilities. They all have hundreds of nuclear weapons, and they all, in one way or another, have professed a policy of minimum nuclear deterrence or maintaining a nuclear arsenal at the lowest level for national security needs. So I think that's the easier way to start a substantive discussion that would be more politically acceptable to Beijing.

[00:56:27] Speaker 4: I would say use every channel that we have that we can use. And since we're running out of time, I would say that not to be scared to disagree, agree to disagree, and do these things with dignity and respect with each other, not just fistfighting all the time, but trying to understand what the motives are, what the incentives are, and behind the actions.

[00:56:51] Speaker 1: I couldn't think of a better note to end on. Thank you very much for the discussion. Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you.

[00:57:19] Speaker 5: Wow. Two days went awful quick. So that was a great panel to end on, and now we need to say thank you and farewell. As we do that, we're going to thank a lot of people and ask that you join in to applaud us when we're through. So first, I would really appreciate the exhibitors who came to share their time and their work with all of you. We were very thankful for the great team here at the Westin, who it was a pleasure to work with throughout, and especially on behalf of James and all the other tea drinkers out there. We're very appreciative that the coffee urns were separate from the hot water urns so that the tea doesn't taste like coffee. Our wonderful event planners at Team Harbinger, especially Kaylee Toth and Claire McElhenney and Kendall Garden, can't recommend them enough, in case you're in the market for an event planner. We had many staff volunteers or voluntolds from Carnegie, every department, so thank you to them and their bosses who allowed us to borrow their staff. They took a lot of time out to come help us run this conference so smoothly, and we're really appreciative. That includes, then, also our incredible finance and development and communications teams who are indispensable partners in making this happen. I think virtually everyone has a role in this conference from throughout Carnegie and did it with consummate professionalism. In particular here, Emily Vaughn, who is the Senior Events Manager at Carnegie, did a fantastic job. Do you want to continue?

[00:58:56] Speaker 6: Sure. I want to especially thank the whole Nuclear Policy Program team. This is truly a team effort. When Toby said nearly everyone at Carnegie was involved, definitely everyone in the Nuclear Policy Program was involved. And it's not just their work planning and executing this conference, but there's a whole other day of programming for the Young Professionals track that will be happening tomorrow and all of that is involved in the planning and execution. I especially want to thank Anna Bartow and Suelli and Jay and Celia who are all actively involved in not just today but tomorrow. Also, for anybody who ever looks at the first draft of things that are prepared for you, the one group of people that never have their thank yous written down are the people who start the remarks. So I want to thank James and Toby. While they chose to turn over the reins this year on day-to-day planning, they still did a tremendous amount of work. And their judgment and their perspective and their creativity and their attention to detail is evident in everything that you've seen here. But having handed over the reins, also we are so grateful to Jane Darby-Menton who has just planned and attended her first Carnegie conference. So congratulations on both of those. I do think that when we think about Jane Darby, she's the perfect example of somebody who brings her tremendous substantive background. Her contribution, she not only was running this conference but chaired a session and moderated it expertly. So when we ask people to be jacks and jills of all trades, and J.D. is certainly one, and we really are so appreciative. And I wanted to thank especially Mackenzie Schussler, the unsung hero of this show. Where's Mackenzie? Where's Mackenzie? Oh, Mackenzie. If anything went right for you this week, it was her. And if anything went wrong, it was not her. Because if she

had been involved, it would have gone right. So thank you, Mackenzie, for everything that you do for us every day, but also for your attention to detail, your professionalism, your commitment, your creativity, and your good humor through it all. We really appreciate it. And before I step down and turn the podium back over to James, I also want to just also thank George Perkovich. A lot of people have complimented me on my tremendous leadership and oversight of this effort this week. And like I said before, I've been all of eight weeks on the job. So any fights with management, any good strategic direction coming from the top, anything that contributed to the success of this is really George. And I'm so grateful that as I step into his hard shoes to fill, in a lot of ways, he's still around and part of our team every day, and I appreciate that too.

[01:02:19] Speaker 7: I don't see George. Oh, there you are. I thought you may have needed to go for a nap. Corrie may only have been on the job for eight weeks, but she really is an exceptional boss who's shown incredible leadership and judgment and attention. So, you know, also thank you to Corrie. I get to say firstly a sincere thanks to all of you, both those of you in the room and those of you watching the live stream who came to sustain and strengthen the bonds that are integral to this community of experts. As Jane Darby stated in the opening yesterday, this conference is largely about you, especially the young professionals who are here for the first time, and you're the principal reason why we've continued to convene this conference and invest the time and resources to sustain it for almost 40 years now. That would not be possible without all of the different funders. They've already been thanked, but they absolutely deserve to be thanked again. They are the Carnegie Corporation of New York. We particularly appreciate the announcement from Dame Louise Richardson today about their intention to sustain and strengthen their own commitment and to build a consortium in the field, Longview Philanthropy, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, the German Federal Foreign Office, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power, Fidelity Charitable Pinnacles Fund, Nagasaki University, and lastly, to our own management at Carnegie who permit us to make a special draw from our endowment that covers the majority of these conference expenses and helps us to subsidize registration. We have to recognize that things have changed a lot since 1987 when the non-governmental, non-proliferation expert community could pretty much fit around a table in a small hotel conference room. There are many more ways for experts to connect with each other now. Indeed, as I've already mentioned, some of you are listening to these words from around the world online, and there's many other meetings and conferences. More critically, and being honest about this, it's becoming increasingly difficult for us to put on this conference at the scale and in the manner that you see it today given the funding challenges that not just we but almost everybody in this room faces today. We want to continue convening this event, but it's not clear that we're going to be able to do so at least in this format. All of which is to say, to put it bluntly, that we're not sure what the next Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference might look like or even if it can take place at all. We very much welcome discussions and ideas amongst this community over the next year or so about how we can do this cooperatively together. On that note, which is a very realistic note even if it's not the note we necessarily wanted to end on, you've already all broken the rules by clapping and saying thank you, but let's now do one final clap to everybody who made this conference possible, particularly JD and Mackenzie. And now what I

should have said before, the clapping was we invite you to join us for the reception out in the lobby. Thank you all very much for coming.