

China and the Bomb

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This is an expanded version of a contribution to a recent panel on China's Global Security Initiative Concept Paper organised by the Society for Angle-Chinese Understanding. A recording of the panel can be viewed online.

I want to focus on nuclear weapons questions as they relate to the Global Security Initiative but in so doing it would be wrong to conceive of nuclear risks as entirely separate from the general security issues that the GSI seeks to address. I'd go further and say that eliminating the existential risks posed by the prospect of nuclear use is a central aspect of any coherent approach to security.

Priority 3 of the concept paper addresses nuclear questions and opens with a reaffirmation of the 2022 joint statement of five nuclear-armed states, China included. This statement was a reaffirmation of a similar statement by Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev in the 1980s: 'a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought'.

Since the January 2022 statement, rather than a reduction in nuclear risks, the world is faced with the most acute set of such risks since the opening of the atomic age. As evidence, we need look no further than the decision of the Atomic Scientists to set the hands of the 'Doomsday Clock' to '90 seconds to midnight'. This cautionary metaphor – signalling the perils we all face resulting from the combined dangers of nuclear war, climate catastrophe and technological threats – has never been as close to 'midnight' as it is now. The Atomic Scientists were clear about the contribution of nuclear threats, arising from the terrible events in Ukraine, to their decision.

If the proposals contained in China's GSI were to become the norm through which states and groups of states interacted on the global stage then we would expect to see a drastic 'winding back' of the minute and second hands of the Doomsday Clock. But such proposals as those contained in the

GSI are not a ‘new departure’ for China. If you trace the public statements of leading spokespeople from the time of China’s emergence as an atomic and nuclear power in the 1960s, through to the 1980s – when the concept of ‘Common Security’ was promoted by progressive forces in Europe – through to the wording of the Global Security Initiative, a certain continuity of thought and concern is overt.

For example, China’s atomic bomb test on 16 October 1964 was not accompanied by jubilant, boastful or threatening public words. Rather, official statements and the communiqué issued by Premier Chou En-Lai struck a note of regret. China’s initial statement said:

‘The Chinese Government has consistently advocated the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. If this had been achieved, China need not have developed nuclear weapons. But our proposal was met with stubborn resistance ...’ The statement continued: *‘The Chinese Government hereby solemnly declares that China will never at any time or under any circumstances be the first to use nuclear weapons ...’*

This statement of ‘No First Use’ policy remains central to China’s nuclear posture to this day. It is worthy of note that the United States and United Kingdom, for instance, repudiate a ‘No First Use’ commitment. The Chinese statement also proposed:

‘That a summit conference of all the countries of the world be convened to discuss the question of the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons, and that as the first step, the summit conference should reach agreement to the effect that the nuclear powers and those countries which may soon become nuclear powers undertake not to use nuclear weapons, neither to use them against non-nuclear countries and nuclear-free zones nor against each other.’

Chou En-Lai’s communiqué to world leaders, sent on 17 October 1964, reiterated this proposal and explained that:

‘China’s mastering of nuclear weapons is entirely for defence and for protecting the Chinese people from ... nuclear threat.’

It could be argued that Chou En-Lai’s attempt to rationalise China’s attainment of nuclear weapons capability is similar to rationalisations employed by every state that has achieved nuclear weapon capabilities.

This argument is not completely false, in my view, but China's continued arguments for nuclear abolition and proposed mechanisms to achieve this – before and after 1964 – are a matter of record.

It is also a matter of record that China had been repeatedly threatened with nuclear attack, first by Truman in 1950, then by Eisenhower in 1953, and again and again throughout the 1950s. The UK National Archives report that the British Government considered issuing the threat of nuclear attack against China in 1961. As the record also shows, these nuclear threats came not only from the West but also from the Soviet Union during the nadir in relations with China.

It is probably true to say that of all the threats issued by nuclear-armed states, more have been made against China than any other country.

China has made repeated efforts to advance proposals for and potential roads towards nuclear disarmament, from before and up to 1964, through to the 1982 UN Special Session on Disarmament, right through until today. In the intervening six decades, China's internal development has been staggering and the dynamics of global relations and global power have shifted to a similarly staggering extent. All of which makes the consistency in approach to nuclear risks worthy of note.

But as interesting and instructive as the historical record is, we live in the here and now when nuclear risks are abundant. Priority 3 of the GSI concept paper – together with the general framework proposed in the document – offers a number of straightforward measures that could substantially reduce these risks.

The Global Security Initiative calls for strengthened 'dialogue and cooperation between nuclear-weapon states to reduce the risks of nuclear war'. Today, in place of such dialogue and cooperation, we have trading of nuclear threats and apparent breakdown in dialogue. Ending these threats and commencing proper discussion is vital. It further calls for safeguarding the 'international nuclear non-proliferation regime based on the' Non-Proliferation Treaty. All the main nuclear powers are signed up to the NPT and all of them have work to do to ensure compliance with it.

Importantly, the GSI proposes active 'support [for] the efforts of countries in relevant regions to establish nuclear-weapon-free zones'. Such active support would not only mirror mechanisms included in previous approaches to 'Common Security' but would activate proper consideration of those countries which have ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons – 68 of them so far, from Antigua and Barbuda to Vietnam – each of which has established a nuclear-weapon-free zone on their territory.

A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. China's call for a system of 'international cooperation on nuclear security' and a 'fair, collaborative and mutually beneficial international security system' would be an important step forward. The question remains: how soon can progress be made on this call? This question is pressing, as the following two examples illustrate.

US/NATO Strategy

The United States and the nuclear-armed alliance within which it plays the dominant role (NATO) have a clear orientation to China. This orientation is demonstrated by the record of US involvement in the region that pre-dates Obama's 'tilt to Asia' by some decades.

The immediate features of US strategy can be seen in such things as a series of diplomatic visits to Taiwan, billions of dollars of military 'aid' to Taiwan, and repeated bellicose statements from US officials. These features signal a much deeper and more worrying strategic intent. Why worrying? Because when taken as a whole, the increased spending, enhanced military presence and repeated talk of China as a 'systemic threat' strongly suggest a strategy that leads to war.

The record on NATO's shifting and developing stance on China largely tracks that of the United States. It is notable that the various disruptions to US/NATO functioning evident under the Trump presidency did not fundamentally disturb this tracking. If anything, NATO more firmly displays 'Trumpist' policies now than it did when he was in office. If disaster is to be averted then policies and approaches very much like those contained in the Global Security Initiative need to be adopted.

As global nuclear tensions increase, China — along with all other nuclear-armed states — is increasing its nuclear capabilities. As we have seen, China first developed nuclear weapon capabilities in an atmosphere of nuclear threat and, as it did so, it expanded existing efforts at nuclear diplomacy. China is not responsible for the current nuclear tensions and is functioning at a time of increased rhetoric and military activity directed against it. Yet, compare and contrast the coverage of China's expanding nuclear capabilities to the almost complete lack of coverage given to the deployment of new, enhanced US nuclear capabilities in Europe.

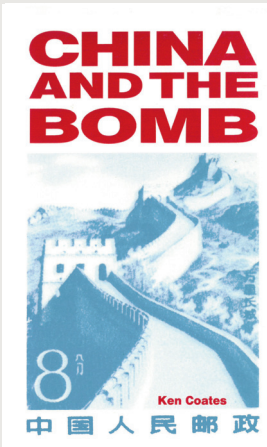
In place of efforts to strip pacifist clauses from Japan's constitution; the AUKUS alliance; spending tens of billions on further militarizing China's periphery; and repeated accusations, the US and NATO need to recognise what growing numbers of states in the Global South see: security is indivisible.

Belarus

Why did Belarus remove nuclear-weapons-free status from its constitution following a referendum? Why has Lukashenko made repeated warnings that Russian nuclear weapons have returned to Belarus? Why has Russia deployed nuclear weapons in Belarus once again? These developments did not happen by magic. Nor did they happen because Lukashenko and Putin are singularly unpleasant people. The developments unfolded over a number of years as a direct consequence of repeated threats to move US nuclear bombs into Poland and as a feature of longstanding US strategy in Eurasia. Rather than adopt an approach to ‘security’ in Europe focused on reducing tensions and threats, with a clear understanding that security is indivisible, the US and NATO have developed an approach to ‘security’ in Europe that multiplies risks. Had an approach like that outlined in the Global Security Initiative been adopted, things would be very different indeed.

Conclusions

China’s Global Security Initiative should be carefully considered and discussed. Even a brief survey of world events indicates the pressing need for a different set of security arrangements from those currently pursued by the US and its NATO allies. Nuclear tensions and nuclear risks are more sharply posed than ever. If humanity is to survive these tensions and risks then new thinking and new approaches are required. The alternative is too horrible to contemplate.



China and the Bomb

Ken Coates

Published in 1986, *China and the Bomb* documents the repeated threats of nuclear bombardment against China and sketches the background and developments of China’s attitude to nuclear weapons at that time.

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