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Tuesday, October 19, 2004

**STRATEGIC CHOICES**  
**Beijing's hour of nuclear judgment**

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Last Saturday marked 40 years since the Chinese government announced its first successful nuclear test, describing it as a major victory against US nuclear blackmail and nuclear threat. At the same time, Beijing solemnly declared that under no circumstances would China be the first to use nuclear weapons.

China developed its nuclear weapons programme in response to US threats. During the Korean war and the 1954-1958 Taiwan Strait crises, America had threatened to use nuclear weapons against China. In the 1960s, the Kennedy administration even contemplated preventive strikes to destroy Beijing's nascent programmes.

After detonating its first nuclear bomb in October 1964, China achieved the capability to produce hydrogen bombs in 1967 and, by 1981, had deployed its first-generation intercontinental ballistic missiles, capable of reaching the continental United States. Over the next two decades, Beijing maintained a nuclear doctrine of minimum deterrence, relying on a small number of nuclear weapons to deliver punitive, countervalue responses to an adversary's first strike.



Today, China has the third-largest nuclear arsenal among the so-called permanent five nuclear countries, with more than 400 weapons. However, most of the systems currently deployed are from the 1970s and 1980s, and their vulnerability to disarming first strikes undermines both the credibility and effectiveness of China's nuclear deterrent capabilities.

This has prompted Beijing to renew efforts to redress its strategic nuclear vulnerability. US decisions on ballistic missile defences, and the changing role of nuclear weapons, could have a direct impact on the scope and pace of China's nuclear modernisation programmes. Analysts have suggested three possible options.



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The most likely response would involve continued development of the existing forces, focusing on improving the survivability of nuclear weapons through greater mobility, shortened launch preparation time, improvements in command and control, and protection or concealment of hardened silos.

A second option would be to respond to US missile defence by increasing nuclear missile levels as necessary to maintain a minimum deterrence. This would be likely to involve a significant increase in the number of Chinese missiles aimed at US targets, the deployment of countermeasures to defeat US missile defences, and the probable deployment of multiple warheads. A third option could involve a doctrinal change away from minimum deterrence to one of limited deterrence.

While the chance of a nuclear confrontation between major powers in the post-cold war era is remote, uncertainties and concerns remain, and miscalculations cannot be completely ruled out in the Sino-US context.

The two countries must address the issue of their long-term nuclear relationship. The determining factors will be whether the two view each other as strategic foes with irreconcilable differences over fundamental issues, competitors with potential conflicts of interest, or potential partners on general international and regional security issues.

The history of their bilateral relationship suggests that all three scenarios are possible: Washington and Beijing should strive to develop a common understanding that minimises, rather than enhances, the role of nuclear weapons in interstate relations. That is the posture China has maintained since its first nuclear test and one that should be endorsed by all nuclear powers.

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