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## The United States' Approach to China's Nuclear Weapons during Donald Trump's Presidency

**Abstract:** While China's rise has been drawing the attention of scholars in the last two decades, Chinese leader Xi Jinping took the issue to a new level by putting great emphasis on Beijing's military power, thereby increasing threat perceptions of China in Washington. Those perceptions were reflected in the Donald Trump Administration's U.S. National Security Strategy. The paper analyzes the U.S. approach to the deadliest part of the PRC's military arsenal, namely its nuclear forces, during Donald Trump's presidency (2017–2021) within the broader context of the U.S. policy of containment of China. The given study uses the process-tracing and the official documents analysis methods and relies upon reports and papers produced by the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Intelligence Community as well as on news articles. First, the paper explores the role of nuclear weapons in international politics; it briefly presents the evolution of China's nuclear strategy. Then, it discusses the policy of containment of China. Finally, the analysis leads to the conclusion that, in the Trump years, China's nuclear expansion in terms of nuclear warheads as well as nuclear delivery vehicles was a source of great concern for the United States and contributed to increasing perceptions of China's nuclear weapons as a threat in Washington. From the U.S. perspective, "the nuclear dragon" was rising in the Indo-Pacific, with its growing interests and opposition towards the preeminence of the United States in the given region, but most importantly, this has happened undetected, as part of hidden plans to develop its own nuclear arsenal.

**Keywords:** Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, nuclear weapons, power, China, United States, nuclear triad

## Stany Zjednoczone wobec chińskiej broni nuklearnej podczas prezydentury Donalda Trumpa

**Abstrakt:** W związku z faktem, że wzrost potencjału Chin przyciągał w ostatnich dziesięcioleciach uwagę wielu badaczy, przywódca Chin Xi Jinping wyniósł to zagadnienie na nowy poziom, akcentując siłę militarną Pekinu. Doprowadził tym samym do postrzegania Chin w Waszyngtonie jako coraz większego zagrożenia. Zostało ono odzwierciedlone w Narodowej

Strategii Bezpieczeństwa USA administracji Donalda Trumpa. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje podejście USA do najbardziej śmiertelnościowego arsenału militarnego ChRL, tj. sił nuklearnych w szerszym kontekście amerykańskiej polityki powstrzymywania Chin w okresie prezydentury Donalda Trumpa (2017–2021). W artykule zastosowana została metoda śledzenia procesu (ang. *process-tracing*) oraz metoda analizy oficjalnych dokumentów, które zostały sporządzone przez Departament Obrony Stanów Zjednoczonych oraz Wspólnotę Wywiadów USA, wykorzystano także artykuły prasowe. W pierwszej części artykułu omówiona została rola broni atomowej w polityce międzynarodowej, a następnie zaprezentowana ewolucja chińskiej strategii nuklearnej. W drugiej części artykułu omówiona została polityka powstrzymywania Chin. Przeprowadzona analiza prowadzi do konkluzji, iż rozbudowa przez Chiny własnego arsenału atomowego, tj. głowic nuklearnych i środków przenoszenia broni atomowej, stała się powodem wielkiego zaniepokojenia Stanów Zjednoczonych oraz przyczyniła się do postrzegania przez Waszyngton chińskiej broni nuklearnej jako rosnącego zagrożenia. Z perspektywy USA „atomowy smok” zyskał na sile w regionie Indo-Pacyfiku, zwiększyły się jego interesy oraz sprzeciw wobec dominacji USA w tym regionie. Co najważniejsze, stało się to niepostrzeżenie, w ramach ukrytych planów rozwoju własnego arsenału nuklearnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, broń atomowa, potęga, Chiny, Stany Zjednoczone, triada nuklearna

## Introduction

China's rise has been drawing scholars' attention in the last two decades. However, Chinese leader Xi Jinping took the issue to a new level, as he created a strong and explicit connection between the ultimate goal of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and the country's military might. Xi's ambitions contributed to the increasing "perceptions of threat"<sup>1</sup> in Washington, which were reflected in the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy, which referred to China as a "revisionist power" (The White House, 2017, p. 25). That, in turn, formalized a new U.S. strategy regarding Beijing based on the very premise of "strategic competition" between the two superpowers (Tellis, 2020; Góralczyk, 2021). Some scholars (Ashbee & Hurst, 2021) even argue that Trump's ascendancy to power resulted in a "paradigmatic shift" concerning the United States' approach to China<sup>2</sup>: the "engagement paradigm" was replaced with the "strategic competition" one. Besides, within President Trump's Administration, growing concerns appeared regarding one minuscule, though the most (potentially) deadly part of China's armed forces, namely its nuclear forces.

<sup>1</sup> Here I rely on Stephen Walt's (1985 & 1987) balance-of-threat theory, which is a refined version of the "orthodox" balance-of-power theory laid out by Kenneth Waltz (1979 & 2000). However, my theoretical approach is yet to be explained in the following paragraphs.

<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, Nick Bisley (2020, p. 167) argues that "there is far more continuity than change between Obama and Trump" in regard to Asia.

In 2021, the then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo co-authored an op-ed, which bluntly articulated that China's "threatening" and "opaque" nuclear buildup was "increasingly dangerous" (Pompeo & Billingslea, 2021).

The problem, however, has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars for at least the last couple of decades. At the dawn of the new century, Brad Roberts, Robert Manning, and Ronald Montaperto published a succinct article titled *China: The Forgotten Nuclear Power* (on the pages of the reputable *Foreign Affairs* magazine), which called for the United States to take Chinese nuclear weapons into account in its strategic calculations: "A lingering bipolar mindset has left China the forgotten nuclear power. It is time that Washington turned its eyes to the East and came to grips with the fact that over the next decade it will likely be China (...) whose nuclear weapons policy will concern America most" (2000, p. 53). There is a rough consensus (e.g., Roberts, Manning & Montaperto, 2000) regarding China's nuclear posture from the 1960s onwards, after China's 1964 nuclear test<sup>3</sup>, namely, that, initially, it was of "minimum deterrence"<sup>4</sup>. However, the evolution of Beijing's nuclear posture sparked a debate among scholars. Back in 1989, Chong-Pin Lin argued that China's nuclear strategy did not meet the criteria of "minimum deterrence." Moreover, Alastair Johnston has pointed out that from the late 1980s onwards, Chinese strategists, who "have not been content with an undifferentiated primitive, countervalue second-strike deterrent status quo," have been developing the concept of "limited deterrence" (1995, pp. 5–6, 42), while You Ji (1999), David Shambaugh (2002), and Mark Schneider (2009) have accentuated the PLA's strategists' shift towards nuclear war-fighting strategies. However, M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros (2010) argue that China relies on "assured retaliation," while Wu Riqiang (2013) holds that China's deterrence is built upon what he refers to as an "uncertain retaliation," i.e., in his opinion, the uncertainty about what exactly would China perceive as the first strike results in decreased motivation to attack China with nuclear weapons.

The given research paper addresses the following questions: how did the United States approach China's nuclear forces during Donald Trump's presidency (2017-2021) within the broader context of the policy of containment of China?

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<sup>3</sup> On China's motivations behind the nuclear test see Halperin, 1965; Lewis & Xue Litai, 1988. The latter is a seminal study, which unveils the history of the Chinese nuclear program.

<sup>4</sup> The next section of the present research paper presents the issue of nuclear deterrence and its various types.

Did Washington perceive Beijing's nuclear weapons as an increasing threat to the United States? Which specific concerns did the United States have regarding China's nuclear arsenal? The given study uses the process-tracing and the official documents analysis methods and relies upon reports and papers produced by the Department of Defense and the U.S. Intelligence Community as well as on news articles. The present research paper proceeds as follows. First, it explores the role of nuclear weapons in international politics. Second, it briefly presents the evolution of China's nuclear strategy. Third, the given research paper discusses the policy of containment of China. Finally, the present research paper analyses the United States' approach to China's nuclear weapons in the Trump years. The given study is built upon two international relations "paradigms," namely social constructivism and political realism. The Author relies on Kenneth Waltz's (1979 & 2000) assumptions about the states that seek survival in the self-help international system of distrust, in which they can only rely on their capabilities. However, the Author also takes into account Alexander Wendt's (1992 & 1999) assumptions that states' actions depend on their previous interactions with each other since those interactions result in specific mutual perceptions. Accordingly, the self-help system of states is not merely a fruit of the anarchy in international relations but a social construction. Therefore, the research paper is built upon Stephen Walt's (1985 & 1987) "balance of threat" theory, which is a refined version of the "orthodox" balance-of-power theory laid out by Kenneth Waltz (1979 & 2000) and emphasizes a state's "perceptions of threat," rather than merely takes into account adversary's material capabilities.

### **Making Sense of Nuclear Weapons**

Nuclear weapons first materialized in the world of science fiction when, in 1914, H. G. Wells published his well-known book titled *The World Set Free* (Grudziński, 1988). On July 16, 1945, the explosion in New Mexico under the codename *Trinity* transformed what once was only possible in peoples' imagination into reality. The detonation of the nuclear bomb marked the dawn of the new "Atomic Age" in international politics. Later, as the *Little Boy* and *Fat Man* were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively, the destructive power of the new "absolute" weapon was fully unveiled.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For the outstanding account of the US nuclear program, its first nuclear test, and the use of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki see Rodes, 1986.

The very potential lethality of nuclear weapons encourages the “proliferation pessimists” to advocate *Nuclear Zero*.<sup>6</sup> Scott Sagan (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, pp. 88–89), as well as William Perry, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, and Sam Nunn (2008), emphasize the dangers of nuclear terrorism in the post-Cold War era. The American statesmen put it succinctly: “we face a very real possibility that the deadliest weapons ever invented could fall into dangerous hands” (Perry, Kissinger, Shultz & Nunn, 2008). Scott Sagan (Sagan & Waltz, 2010) emphasizes that horizontal and vertical proliferation<sup>7</sup> would create more possibilities for terrorists to get access to nuclear weapons. Kenneth Waltz (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, pp. 92–93), on the contrary, emphasizes the “peace-preserving” power of the weapons:

“[a]bolishing the weapons that have caused sixty-five years of peace would certainly have effects. It would, among other things, make the world safe for the fighting of the World War III (...) They are the only weapons invented that work decisively against their own use. Those who advocate a zero option argue in effect that we should eliminate the cause of the extensive peace the nuclear world has enjoyed.”<sup>8</sup>

Waltz’s argument has been reaffirmed by the former U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara (1983, p. 79), who stated bluntly that the weapons “serve no military purpose whatsoever,” they are, in his own words, “totally useless – except only to deter one’s opponent from using them.”

Paradoxically, nuclear weapons constituted the cornerstone of peace during the Cold War, but this very peace rested on what Henry Kissinger (2014, p. 334) has described as the possibility of “mutual suicide.” The United States and the USSR both had the capability to unacceptably damage each other, in other words, destroy each other as functioning political entities, which, in turn, deterred them from attacking the adversary with nuclear weapons in the first place. Deterrence

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<sup>6</sup> The following international initiatives are noteworthy in this regard: *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (ICAN) and *Global Zero* as both are aimed at the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

<sup>7</sup> Horizontal proliferation refers to the situation when new nuclear states materialize, while vertical proliferation means that the existing nuclear states increase their arsenals.

<sup>8</sup> See also Waltz, 1990. Waltz claims that a nuclear-zero world is not attainable, as under the “nuclear ban” countries would be tempted to „cheat,” namely to rearm (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, p. 93). As Thomas Schelling (1962, p. 392) nicely put it, “[s]hort of universal brain surgery, nothing can erase the memory of weapons and how to build them.”

was based on both superpowers' capability to destroy each other, on the stalemate, which is known as the "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) (Kissinger, 2014, pp. 332–336; Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 128–133).

While nuclear deterrence was praised by Waltz for its "peace-preserving" power, as pointed out by Alexey Arbatov (2021, p. 74), it has a "dual nature" because those nuclear weapons that are used for the prevention of war might also be used practically: "no weapons system is created for deterrence (...). The development of all nuclear weapons systems integrates the latest technical achievements to perform specific military tasks."<sup>9</sup> This reflects one of the "self-destructive" tendencies of nuclear deterrence, namely the concepts of limited war-fighting, which are the product of the concerns about the possible failure of deterrence (Arbatov, 2021, p. 75). Arbatov's deliberations reflect two broad perspectives on nuclear deterrence, namely "nuclear statism" and "nuclear strategism."<sup>10</sup> The former holds that nuclear wars are not worth starting, for they would lead to the apocalypse, while the latter is based on the assumption that nuclear wars are winnable. The first perspective, which is based on the vision of the countervalue attack (valuable civilian targets), translates into what is referred to as the "minimum deterrence" strategy. The second perspective, which builds upon the skeptical view on presumably automatically stable deterrence (Wohlstetter, 1959; Gray, 1979) and takes into account the possibility of attacking counterforce targets (*stricte* military targets) within the limited nuclear war, translates into the "limited deterrence strategy"<sup>11</sup> (Johnston, 1995).

### **China's Nuclear Strategy: Genesis and Evolution**

In 1946, while being interviewed by American correspondent Anna Strong, Mao Zedong referred to the atomic bomb as to a "paper tiger" and further claimed that while "[i]t looks terrible, but in fact, it isn't (...). the atom bomb is a weapon of mass slaughter, but the outcome of a war is decided by the people" (*Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, 1975; see Powell, 1965). It is argued that it was China's

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<sup>9</sup> Alexey Arbatov (2021, p. 74) also accentuates that this, in turn, carries the risk of political decisions becoming hostages of the military plans.

<sup>10</sup> I borrowed the distinction between "nuclear statism" and "nuclear strategism" from Renny Babiarz (2015).

<sup>11</sup> On the distinction between the countervalue and counterforce targets see Payne & Walton, 2002, pp.161–164.

desire to return to its great power status and the country's security concerns that pushed China on its road toward possession of the nuclear arsenal. On the one hand, as Communists under Mao took power over the state in 1949, their beliefs about force and the necessity to restore China's position in the international arena rooted in nationalist ideology paved the way for Beijing's decision to obtain its own nuclear arsenal<sup>12</sup> (Lewis & Xue Litai, 1988, p. 35). On the other hand, the skepticism concerning the Soviet nuclear umbrella, the events linked to the ending of the Korean War (1950–1953),<sup>13</sup> as well as the First Indochina War (1946–1954) and the Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954–1955) also contributed to China's decision to begin its quest for nuclear weapons (Lewis & Xue Litai, 1988, pp. 11–34). Ultimately, as maintained by Morton Halperin (1965, pp. 75–82), four aims were driving China's nuclear ambitions: the ability to deter a nuclear attack on China, the increased influence within the Communist block, the possession of extra instruments to support the “wars of national liberation,” and the assertion of China's hegemony in the region.

In 1964, Beijing's efforts fruited in China's first successful detonation of a nuclear device at the Lop Nur Nuclear Weapons Test Base in Xinjiang Province.<sup>14</sup> Immediately after the test, Beijing stated that it will never “at any time and under any circumstances” be the first to use the weapons, which established China's “no-first-use” (NFU) policy (New York Times, 1964). There is a rough consensus (e.g., Roberts, Manning & Montaperto, 2000) regarding China's initial nuclear posture in Mao's era, namely, that it was of “minimum deterrence.”<sup>15</sup> As accentuated by Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros (2010), the comparably small and vulnerable Beijing's nuclear arsenal, as well as limited doctrinal development<sup>16</sup> (until the mid-1990s), was to a great extent a fruit

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<sup>12</sup> This decision was made in the mid-1950s (Wilson Lewis & Xue Litai, 1988, p. 35).

<sup>13</sup> During the Korean War, as William Perry nicely put it, „nuclear weapons were the dog that barked but did not bite.” He means that there were instances when the United States considered using atomic weapons (Perry, 2006, p. 80).

<sup>14</sup> See Lewis & Xue Litai, 1988, pp. 170–189.

<sup>15</sup> Although a study published by the RAND Corporation claims that after its first successful detonation of a nuclear bomb in 1964 China relied on „existential deterrence” because while Beijing did, indeed, possess a nuclear bomb, it lacked the delivery systems (Mulvenon, *et al.*, 2006, p. 97).

<sup>16</sup> The authors argue that back then, China's nuclear doctrine was based on merely two principles: no-first-use and opposition towards the arms race (Fravel & Medeiros, 2010, p. 57).

of China's top leaders' beliefs about the weapons<sup>17</sup>. They were seen not as instruments that were meant to be used in combat for military purposes but, instead, as those tools that allowed China to deter a nuclear attack as well as avoid nuclear coercion. The deterrence ought to rely on assured retaliation, *i.e.*, the ability to cause unacceptable damage to the adversary following the first strike (Fravel & Medeiros, 2010, pp. 55–66). Renny Babiarz further claims that it was China's strategic culture in Mao Zedong's era that restrained the development of its nuclear forces (which resulted in their vulnerability). While referring to the Mao era's strategic culture, he means the "ideas about the nature of warfare," which were shared by the leadership of China in the political era of Mao Zedong (1949–1976). Renny Babiarz holds that this period's strategic culture should be understood through the prism of the concept of "People's War,"<sup>18</sup> which was based on the assumption that notwithstanding the significance of weapon technology, "human willpower" was of the highest importance. Therefore, China's leadership under Mao prioritized conventional warfare (for example, the development of the Third Front<sup>19</sup>) over nuclear, which, in turn, resulted in the self-limitation of the nuclear program (Babiarz, 2015, pp. 422–432).

Mao Zedong also elaborated the concept of "offensive defense or defence through decisive engagements," which, in his opinion, was meant to be adopted within a broader context of "people's war." The given concept relied on the following principles: engage the enemy proactively, exploit its weak points, and attempt to destroy both the will and capabilities of the enemy. In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping started to tentatively question this very concept and later transformed Mao's "lure the enemy in deep and actively defend" into simple "active defense." The new thinking about the frontier defense fruited in increased attention regarding the weapons and new technology instead of Mao's "human will." This, in turn, resulted in the birth of the new Deng's formula: "people's war under modern conditions." (Shambaugh, 2002, pp. 58–63; Fravel, 2019, pp. 139–144).

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<sup>17</sup> The authors claim that the second force that shaped China's nuclear posture up to the mid-1990s was existing organizational and political constraints.

<sup>18</sup> The term is rooted in the events of the Chinese civil war when the mobilization method the Communists used was referred to in this way (Babiarz, 2015, p. 426).

<sup>19</sup> The Third Front (1964–1971) was a colossal program of investment carried out in South Western and Western Chinese regions, which was aimed at the creation of a massive "self-sufficient industrial base area" that was meant to become a "strategic reserve" in the case of war (Naughton, 1988, pp. 351–352).



In regard to nuclear weapons, in 1978, Deng emphasized that China was supposed to obtain the counterstrike capability: “power to strike back” (“huan shou zhi li”). In 1981, this view was reaffirmed by General Zhang Aiping (Lei Liu, 2018, p. 496), a then-Head of the National Defence Science and Technology Committee, who earlier introduced the “dog-beating stick theory” while referring to the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) development program: “Yo may call it a killer weapon or a nuclear trump card; I’d like to call it a da got gun [‘dog-beating stick’]. No one will dare intimidate us when we have it and then my mission is completed” (Lei Lui, 2018, p. 488). Most importantly, it is with the support of China’s leadership that General Zhang was able to successfully develop the plan of the “San Zhua” which included three goals, which were set to achieve the “ability to strike back”: intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), and communication satellite (Lei Liu, 2018, pp. 487–491, 497–498).

In the post-Deng era, specifically in the late 1980s, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) began to change its attitude toward nuclear weapons by starting to develop the concept of “limited deterrence,” which rests upon the limited war-fighting capabilities. As maintained by Alastair Johnston, Chinese strategists, who “have not been content with an undifferentiated primitive, countervalue second-strike deterrent status quo,” have been developing a concept of limited deterrence (1995, pp. 5–6, 42). As argued by You Ji, in the late 1990s, the PLA commanders started their transition from treating nuclear weapons as weapons of mass destruction that have no use in actual combat to the recognition of the ability to practically use them on the battlefield. The author points out the young generals’ willingness to include nuclear missiles in their “war games.” You Li emphasizes that “some military planners are now tempted to contemplate the use of nuclear weapons in an escalation of conventional war (...) the SMF’s [the Strategic Missile Force] war-fighting preparations begin with its efforts to grasp the nature, process, and consequences of a tactical nuclear war” (1999, p. 246). He further claims that the demise of the old mindset based on the idea that “any nuclear fight was mass destruction” took place. It was replaced with the concept of “theatre nuclear war”, which would have been limited in its nature; that, in turn, resulted in the PLA’s preference for the tactical nuclear weapons, instead of the strategic ones (You Ji, 1999, pp. 247–248, 252). Mark Schneider (2009) and David Shambaugh (2002, pp. 92–93) point out the increasing PLA’s nuclear fighting capabilities, which result

in China's evolution towards a limited deterrence doctrine. As David Shambaugh nicely put it, "the PLA anticipates fighting a nuclear conflict if attacked first" (2002, p. 93).

### Containing the Rising Dragon

At the dawn of the new century, China's rise in both economic and military realms sparked a heated debate about the future relations between the established great power, the United States of America, and the emerging one, the People's Republic of China. As pointed out by Aaron Friedberg (2005), there exists a 'rift' between the scholars, regarding the given problem, within every major school of international relations, namely, realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The "pessimists" from each school focus on the forces that push Washington and Beijing towards confrontation, while the "optimists" emphasize those forces that facilitate the cooperation between the two great powers. The most notorious "pessimist", John Mearsheimer, in his famous paper titled "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia" bluntly claims that Beijing's increasing might will result in "an intense security competition between China and the United States, with considerable potential for war" (2010, p. 382). On the contrary, realist "optimists," *inter alia*, Henry Kissinger (2011 & 2012), Charles Glaser (2011 & 2015), Graham Allison (2017), and Kishore Mahhubani (2020) argue that the conflict is not bound to take place, as they put a strong emphasis on the statesmen's ability to have a profound impact on the decision-making processes. As Graham Allison (who quoted Shakespeare) nicely put it at the ending of his book titled "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?," "our destiny lies 'not in our stars, but in ourselves'" (2017, p. 240).

Meanwhile, from the Chinese perspective, the rise of China is not meant to "shake the world,"<sup>20</sup> but is, instead, a "return" to a "normal state of affairs" (Kissinger, 2012, p. 45). It is succinctly argued that China is a "civilization pretending to be a nation-state" (Pye, 1992, p. 1162). Henry Kissinger (2011, pp. 8–15) and Bogdan Góralczyk (2018, pp. 437–462; 2021, pp. 15–33), who build upon this perspective, argue that Beijing perceives international politics through the looking glass of the era of China's preeminence. In the times of the Chinese Empire, the "Middle

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<sup>20</sup> The quote "Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world" is attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte.

Kingdom” perceived itself as the center of the world order while the Emperor was seen as a deity, the “Son of Heavens” by the Chinese themselves. The view of China being a culturally superior civilization is anchored in those ancient perceptions and constitutes a crucial component of China’s contemporary political culture<sup>21</sup>.

In the late 1960s, the “rapprochement” between Washington and Beijing became possible as Mao Zedong perceived it as a “strategic imperative” in the face of increasing Soviet pressure, while Richard Nixon treated it as an opportunity to present a new American approach to its international leadership amid the public opinion’s growing disapproval of Washington’s involvement in Indochina (Kissinger, 2011, pp. 202–236; Kissinger, 1994, p. 674). The strategic dialogue between China and the United States resulted in an unprecedented event: on February 21, 1972, the American President arrived in the capital of Communist China<sup>22</sup>. President Nixon’s visit to China did not only enable the “reentry of China into the global diplomatic game” but also led to the official establishment of the American “One China” policy and the gradual improvement of Sino-U.S. relations (Kissinger, 2011, pp. 267–275; Tellis, 2020, pp. 4–5).

In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping initiated reforms aimed at further modernization and development of the Chinese economy, which resulted in the extraordinary economic growth of China (Vogel, 2011, pp. 240–248, 423–477; Tisdell, 2009). While Deng advised the future generations of Chinese leaders to conceal Beijing’s capabilities and goals, from the 1990s onwards, China began pursuing a more active foreign policy, which evolved into the critique of the hegemony as a threat to peaceful global development (Mierzejewski, 2013, pp. 187–213). Nonetheless, the Clinton Administration, which based its judgment of China on the liberal worldview, took decisive steps towards the development of the “comprehensive engagement” between Washington and Beijing (Tellis, 2020, pp. 4–6).

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<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as accentuated by Kishore Mahbubani (2020, p. 89), this very Beijing’s self-perception results in a crucial difference between the United States and China: while the former believes that it is the exceptional “empire of liberty,” a universal example other countries have to follow for the sake of the whole humanity, the latter believes in the opposite: Chinese values are not universal, but only applicable for the Chinese people.

<sup>22</sup> The American diplomat Henry Kissinger played a crucial role in the strategic dialogue between Washington and Beijing and, therefore, contributed to this meeting. In his book *On China* (2011) the author describes in detail the secret talks that were held between American and Chinese diplomats (in which he participated), which led to a dramatic change in relations between the two superpowers.

In the early 2000s, the Bush Administration concluded that China's military rise (which was possible due to Beijing's increasing economic might) posed a threat to the U.S. power projection capabilities in the region of Asia-Pacific, which brought into fruition the U.S. "reorientation strategy" toward Asia (Silove, 2016, pp. 45–46, 53–58, 86–87). On November 10, 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the U.S. "pivot" towards Asia-Pacific (U.S. Department of State, 2011). On November 17, 2011, in his address to the Australian Parliament, President Obama announced that the Asia-Pacific region would be of "top priority" for his national security team (The White House, 2011). In this regard, it is claimed (Silove, 2016; Christensen, 2015; Congressional Research Service, 2012; Bisley, 2020) that Obama Administration's "pivot" to Asia, which was later rebranded into "re-balancing" U.S. policy concerning to Asia (Weitz, 2012), was not an abrupt change, but merely a continuation and expansion of the previous administrations' approaches. As maintained by Nick Bisley (2020, pp. 162–166), the ultimate goal of Obama's "re-balancing" was to ensure the continuing U.S. dominance in the region of Asia-Pacific (Washington's long-term strategic policy) in the face of China's increasing might. However, the novel features of the policy might also be identified, namely the emphasis on multilateralism and geoeconomics.

### **A Strategic Competitor with Nuclear Weapons**

Edward Ashbee and Steven Hurst (2021) argue that with Donald Trump's ascendancy to power in the United States, a paradigmatic shift took place concerning its approach to China<sup>23</sup>: the "engagement paradigm" was replaced with the "strategic competition" one. The authors argue that up until 2017, the "engagement paradigm" was in place, with Bush Administration designating China as a "responsible stakeholder"<sup>24</sup> and the Obama Administration adhering to the main principles of the given paradigm as well (Ashbee & Hurst, 2021, pp. 4–5). Ashley Tellis (2020, pp. 10–11, 24–26) presents a variety of factors that brought about the given shift, apart from President Trump's negative attitude towards liberal economic order as, in his eyes, the one that does not serve the interests of

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<sup>23</sup> On the contrary, Nick Bisley (2020, p. 167) argues that "there is far more continuity than change between Obama and Trump" concerning Asia.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State in the Bush Administration, was the one who referred to China as to a "responsible stakeholder" (Zoellick, 2005).

the United States<sup>25</sup>. First, the rise of China presents a challenge to the U.S. preeminence in the region, while Washington's initiatives aimed at the preservation of this very dominance would be perceived as threatening by Beijing<sup>26</sup>. Second, the U.S. corporate sector was a victim of *inter alia* intellectual property theft and coerced technology transfers in China<sup>27</sup>. Third, rising Chinese authoritarianism at home as well as China's increasing assertiveness regarding its neighbors, are the source of concerns within the United States foreign policy establishment. Ultimately, China's military modernization, which is undermining Washington's ability to potentially act according to its security commitments in the region, pushes the U.S. military planners to seek more effective solutions to ensure Washington's ability to project its power in the Asia-Pacific region. In October 2017, in a speech delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping outlined the objective of the modernization of "national defense" and China's "forces" by 2035 and transforming "people's armed forces" into "world-class forces" by the mid-21 century (Xi Jinping, 2017, p. 48; see Fravel, 2020). In 2021, the President of the People's Republic of China highlighted the significance of the modernisation of a country's national defence and its armed forces as well as accentuated China's objective of possessing "world-class forces:" "We will elevate our people's armed forces to world-class standards so that we are equipped with greater capacity and more reliable means for safeguarding our national sovereignty, security, and development interests" (Xinhua, 2021). He concluded his speech with a call for fulfilling the "Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation"<sup>28</sup> (Xinhua, 2021).

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<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, as pointed out by Alastair Johnston (2019), according to the news reports, Donald Trump's thinking about the People's Republic of China has been influenced by the book written by Michael Pillsbury titled "The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to replace America as the Global Superpower". The author of the given book holds that in the 1950s Beijing developed a secret plan aimed at surpassing the United States in the following 100 years.

<sup>26</sup> The reason is anchored in the anarchical structure of the international system. This structure, in turn, as maintained by Kenneth Waltz (1979), automatically results in the emergence of the self-help system of states. As argued by Alexander Wendt (1992 & 1999), the materialization of the self-help system is not automatic but is instead a product of the history of interactions of states within the anarchical international system.

<sup>27</sup> Kishore Mahbubani (2020, pp. 25–49) also points out that China alienated the business community in the United States and considers it to be a "strategic mistake" of Beijing.

<sup>28</sup> In 2014, Xi Jinping connected two ideas, namely the "Chinese Dream" and the "Great Rejuvenation of Chinese nation". See Xi Jinping, 2014a & 2014b.

As Ashley Tellis (2020, pp. 3–4) nicely put it, Trump Administration “only articulated boldly what both the George W. Bush and the Barack Obama administrations feared as a possibility but hoped to avoid (...)”. He means the designation of China as a “strategic competitor” in the 2018 United States National Defence Strategy<sup>29</sup> and “revisionist power” in the 2017 United States National Security Strategy. In the latter document, it is claimed that China seeks to “shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests” as well as desires to “displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region” (The White House, 2017, p. 25). Ashley Tellis (2020, pp. 26–30) concludes that Trump Administration resisted China’s behavior in the following areas: Beijing’s attempts to achieve domination in the Indo-Pacific, China’s behavior in the economic realm, Beijing’s efforts to develop alternative technical standards, and China’s goal of technological preeminence.

The Department of Defense (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), the Department of State (Pompeo & Billingslea, 2021), as well as the U.S. Intelligence Community (Office of the Director of the National Intelligence, 2017, 2018, 2019 & 2021) in the Trump years exercised constant vigilance in regard to China’s military development, *inter alia* its nuclear forces. In the reports titled “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China” compiled by the Office of the Secretary of Defense of the United States, it is stated that the priority of the PRC’s nuclear policy is to maintain a nuclear force which is able to “survive a first strike” as well as capable of responding with sufficient strength to “inflict unacceptable damage” on its adversary (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). The given reports also address China’s “no first use” (NFU) policy by emphasizing the existence of the “ambiguity” in relation to conditions under which the given commitment would no longer apply (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). Some reports also warn that China’s “commingling of some of its conventional and nuclear forces” and the aforementioned ambiguities related to its NFU policy could potentially “complicate deterrence and escalation management during the conflict” since it is not known how the Chinese leadership would respond to the conventional attack

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<sup>29</sup> In the summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States, which is available in the public domain, it is bluntly stated that “China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage (...) It [China] will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p.1).

on China's nuclear forces (2018, 2019). Furthermore, it is reported that some PLA writings have a positive attitude regarding the "launch-on-warning" (LOW) nuclear posture, which equals a faster response to the adversary's attack<sup>30</sup> (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017). The 2020 study maintains that it is the intention of China to introduce the LOW posture for some of its forces; meanwhile, the 2021 study claims that while Beijing is implementing the LOW posture, it calls upon the abandonment of this very posture by other nuclear states for the sake of the improved strategic stability (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020 & 2021).

While the 2017 report compiled by the Office of the Secretary of State merely informs that China's investments of considerable resources are aimed at the preservation of a "limited, but survivable nuclear force to ensure that the PLA can deliver a damaging responsive nuclear strike," the reports published in the years that followed accentuate Beijing's "lack of transparency regarding the scope and scale of its nuclear modernization program [which] raises questions regarding its future intent" (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). The 2020 report claims that China's "evolving view of the security landscape" as well as its "strategic ambitions" bring to fruition the drastic changes in Beijing's nuclear forces in terms of size, capabilities, and readiness. It further argues that those changes "seem likely to outpace potential developments by any adversary that could possibly threaten China's ability to retaliate against a first strike." The report concludes that these developments, as well as Beijing's lack of transparency, result in concerns about China's shift from the "minimal deterrent" to what the People's Liberation Army's writings describe as the "limited deterrent" posture (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 85–88).

The 2021 report accentuates that since Beijing's "perceived national security requirements" are going to grow as a result of China's transition from a "large country" to a "powerful country," it is likely that its military forces, *inter alia*, nuclear forces, are going to grow accordingly, to defend those "greater interests" (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2021, p. 92). In 2021, the Defense Intelligence Community confirmed this assessment by stating that "Beijing will continue the

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<sup>30</sup> Under the LOW posture, the warning of the adversary's strike leads to the response, i.e., the decision to counterattack is made before the detonation. James R. Holmes (2020) holds that China's evolution toward the LOW posture will result in problems, *inter alia*, the interpretation of the ambiguous data from the radars as well as a decreased time frame for the decision-making processes in Beijing, after the hypothetical first strike.

most rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal in its history” (Office of the Director of the National Intelligence, 2021, p. 7). As indicated in the Nuclear Posture Review, China’s growing nuclear capabilities are consistent with Xi’s goal to transform the People’s Liberation Army into the “world-class military” by 2050 (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 11). However, as mentioned in the 2021 Office of the Secretary of Defence report on China’s power, the specific requirements that have to be met by the nuclear forces under this very goal remain unclear, based on the available public sources (p. 92).

The reports compiled by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021) highlight Beijing’s efforts aimed at the development of the nuclear triad, in other words, the three methods of delivery of nuclear weapons: from the air (*via* strategic bombers), from the sea (by submarines), and the land (from underground silos).<sup>31</sup> The reports on China’s power compiled in the years 2017–2020 inform that the modernization of its submarine force is one of the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN)<sup>32</sup> high priorities, and since 2002 PLAN constructed four JIN class (also referred to as Type 094) ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs)<sup>33</sup> equipped with the JL-2 nuclear ballistic missiles with a maximum range of 8000–9000 km (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2021), which, in turn, represent Beijing’s first credible nuclear deterrent. As reported by the Office of the Secretary of Defense in the year 2021, PLAN increased the quantity of its JIN class SSBNs equipped with the JL-2 nuclear ballistic missiles to six. Furthermore, it is stated that as the PRC “fields newer, more capable, and longer ranged submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) such as the JL-3<sup>34</sup>, the PLAN will gain the ability to target the continental United States” (p. 91).

The aforementioned reports also reflect Beijing’s development of the air “leg” of its nuclear triad. The 2018 study builds upon General Ma Xiaotian’s announcement of the then-undergoing development of the “next generation” advanced long-range strategic bomber (Zhao Lei, 2016; Reuters, 2016) and

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<sup>31</sup> See Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, 2021. For a great description of the nuclear triad possessed by the United States see U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.

<sup>32</sup> As accentuated by Rafał Kwieciński (2018, p. 110), it was not until 2004, that China’s security documents reflected Beijing’s goal to possess a navy capable of operating beyond China’s coastal area.

<sup>33</sup> For great commentaries on China’s ballistic missile submarines see Funaiole, Bermudez & Hart, 2021; Larson, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> The JL-3 is assessed to have a maximum range of over 9000 km (Funaiole, Bermudez & Hart, 2021).



informs about China's stealth strategic bomber development program. It also mentions PLA Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Ding Laihang's goal to build a truly "strategic" air force, which was announced in 2017 (Zhao Lei, 2017) and accentuates China's modernization of this branch of the military, which fruits in the erosion of the United States' "significant technical advantage" in the air domain. The report informs that Beijing possesses the H-6K aircraft capable of carrying six land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) that can potentially reach Guam and highlights Beijing's efforts to increase its long-range precision strike capability by developing a refuelable H-6 bomber.<sup>35</sup> It also alarms that both the H-6 bomber and the planned stealth bomber might carry nuclear missiles in the future (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, pp. 33–34). The 2020 and 2021 studies pay great attention to the H-6N bomber, which was revealed during the 2019 PRC's 70th Anniversary parade. The new bomber has greater reach (and is, therefore, more optimal for long-range strikes) than the other H-6 bombers due to its air-to-air refueling capability. Furthermore, the latter report concludes that the H-6N bomber provides a "platform for the air component of the PRC's nascent nuclear triad" (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 50–51; 2021, pp. 91–92).

As indicated by the 2016 report, China's PLA Rocket Force (before 2015: the PLA Second Artillery Force, PLASAF) had been implementing modernization plans aimed at the improvement of the "strategic deterrent capability." Specifically, Beijing began fielding the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) as well as had been working on the development of the new multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capable ICBM called DF-41. Moreover, China had been improving its silo-based ICBMs as well as its mobile delivery systems. Meanwhile, according to the 2016 study, China possessed about 75-100 silo-based and road-mobile ICBMs combined. The report also emphasizes that the road-mobile CSS-10 Mod 2 is capable of reaching nearly every location within the continental United States (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017, p. 25). The 2018 report refers to the PLA's 90th Anniversary parade in July 2017, during which China showed, *inter alia*, a new medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM), namely DF-16G, which, as maintained by Beijing, can better infiltrate missile defense systems (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 36). The 2019 report

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<sup>35</sup> Chinese H-6 is a copy of the Soviet Tupolev Tu-16 medium strategic bomber.

informs that China has tested the hypersonic glide vehicles; specifically, in 2018, China successfully tested the XINGKONG-2 (Starry Sky-2), while the 2020 report accentuates that in 2019 the PRC launched more ballistic missiles (for testing and training) than the rest of the world combined. Furthermore, according to the 2020 study, Beijing places heavy emphasis on the development of hypersonic glide vehicles, as well as works on theater-range missiles and methods of countering the adversaries' missile defense systems (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019, p. 44; Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 55–56). The 2021 study concludes that China's land-based nuclear forces include about 100 ICBMs and several theater-range-mobile MRBMs, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2021, p. 91). Finally, the 2020 study projects the increase of China's warheads on land-based ICBMs to 200 in the next five years; however, the 2021 report claims that the PRC "accelerated its nuclear expansion," which, in turn, might enable Beijing to have up to 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027 at its disposal. The study further maintains that China "likely intends to have at least 1,000 warheads by 2030" (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 55–56; Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2021, p. 92).

### **Conclusion**

In the eyes of Washington, maintaining the capability to inflict unacceptable damage on its adversary through the second strike was of the highest priority for China between 2017 and 2021. However, both the U.S. Department of Defense as well as the U.S. Intelligence Community claimed that since China was transforming into a "powerful" country, it had new ambitions and growing interests that were reflected in the increasing might of China's nuclear forces. The U.S. Department of Defence also stated that the changes in those very forces outpaced any potential dangers for the PRC as well as reflected Beijing's growing ambitions and were consistent with Xi Jinping's plan to transform the PLA into the "world-class" military. Nonetheless, in Washington's eyes, the increasing power of China's nuclear forces, combined with a lack of transparency in regard to the development of its nuclear forces, raised concerns that China was replacing the "minimum deterrence" strategy with the "limited deterrence" strategy. Furthermore, China's ambiguity concerning what the decision-makers in Beijing considered a "first strike" was perceived as a source of problems for "strategic deterrence."

The U.S. Department of Defense paid great attention to China's efforts aimed at the development of the "nuclear triad" by the PRC. It emphasized the fact that China already possessed the sea nuclear deterrent, namely the JIN-class SSBNs equipped with the SLBMs JL-2, which are the basis for future developments that might potentially reach the continental United States in the future. The U.S. Department of Defense highlights China's efforts aimed at the development of the stealth bomber and alarms about the "erosion" of the U.S. advantage in the air domain in comparison to China as a result of Beijing's modernization achievements, *inter alia* China's H-6N bomber, which is perceived as an air "leg" of China's nascent nuclear triad. Regarding China's PLA Rocket Force, it is bluntly stated that this one is capable of reaching the locations in the continental United States and is successfully working on hypersonic glide vehicles and methods of countering adversaries' missile defense systems.

Conclusively, in the Trump years, China's nuclear expansion in terms of nuclear warheads as well as nuclear delivery vehicles was a source of great concern for the United States and contributed to increasing perceptions of China's nuclear weapons as a threat in Washington. Moreover, from the U.S. perspective, China's ambiguity concerning its NFU policy was making nuclear deterrence less stable. The U.S. concerns were also extremely explicit in case of China's achievements in regard to the air domain of the nuclear triad. In the eyes of Washington in the Trump years, the nuclear dragon was rising in the Indo-Pacific, with its growing interests and opposition towards the preeminence of the United States in the given region, but, most importantly, secretiveness and hidden intentions concerning its very nuclear arsenal.

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