

**Possible Changes in China's Nuclear Policy and the Significance for
Arms Control**

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The latest annual report by the Pentagon on China's military development, submitted to Congress in early September 2020, states that China is planning to double the number of its estimated 200 nuclear warheads in the coming decade, and to modernize its nuclear forces. The number of Chinese nuclear weapons is very small in comparison with the United States arsenal, which has some 5,800 nuclear warheads. This gap has sparked calls in China to strengthen its nuclear capability and reach 1,000 nuclear warheads as soon as possible. Over the years, Beijing has adhered to a "minimum deterrence" policy and maintained a relatively limited nuclear order of battle, while calling on the other major powers to join it in adopting a policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons. The rising hostility between the United States and China, however, and the continued destabilization of the multilateral regimes in which they are both members are liable to lead to a change in Chinese strategy and the expansion of its nuclear capabilities. These developments impact negatively on international norms, and in particular, could affect the policy of various Asian countries in the nuclear realm, including Japan and South Korea. They could also indirectly affect nuclear development in Middle East countries, especially Iran. Israel should prepare accordingly.

The latest annual report by the Pentagon on China's military development, submitted to Congress in early September 2020, states, "Over the next decade, China's nuclear warhead stockpile – currently estimated to be in the low 200s – is projected to at least double in size as China expands and modernizes its nuclear forces." China seeks to expand its "nuclear triad," with the development of a nuclear-capable air-launched ballistic missile (ALBM) and improved ground and sea-based nuclear capabilities. China is adopting a policy of ambiguity on the number of warheads that it possesses, and declares publicly that it holds only what is necessary "for essential minimum deterrence." Western research sources estimate that the number of warheads possessed by China is far smaller than the arsenals of the United States and Russia. According to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), as of 2020, the United States has some 5,800 warheads and Russia 6,375, over 1,500 of which are operationally

deployed in each of these two countries, while China has 320 nuclear warheads with no operational deployment.

China conducted a nuclear test in October 1964, in accordance with the belief of then-leader Mao Zedong that China should develop a small number of nuclear weapons solely for deterrence purposes. In Mao's view, which he outlined to Western visitors, nuclear weapons were designed for intimidation and deterrence, not for use. He said that the greater the number of nuclear weapons, the harder it would be to start a nuclear war; that nuclear weapons were a "paper tiger"; and that the coming wars would be conventional. In recent decades, China has adhered to a strategy of essential minimum deterrence by developing a limited nuclear force, certainly in comparison with the United States and Russia, while preserving an effective second-strike capability, inter alia by expanding its long-range ballistic capabilities. In July 2019, China published a white paper repeating and detailing its defense concept, stating, inter alia, "China remains committed to a nuclear strategy for self-defense. It is committed to a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances, and an unconditional commitment not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones...China does not engage in any nuclear arms race with any other country, and keeps its nuclear capabilities at the minimum level required for national security." In tandem, China continued to call on the other major powers to join it in adopting a policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons.

Before early 90s, China regarded multilateral organizations, including international treaties on strategic matters, as discriminatory and designed during the Cold War for the benefit of the United States. In 1992, however, China joined the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which marked a change in its approach and a decision to become an active partner in such frameworks. With this outlook, China cooperated with the United States in negotiations to formulate the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and signed it in September 1996, immediately after the United States. China declared that it was moving ahead with its ratification processes in the expectation of having this coincide with ratification by the US Congress. The decision by the United States not to ratify the treaty and decisions in recent years to withdraw from its international obligations as a signatory country have prompted second thoughts in China about the future of arms control agreements in general, and the ability to devise an agreed nuclear policy among the major powers in particular.

In recent months, senior US administration officials declared that they did not intend to extend the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia to reduce nuclear weapons, as the treaty is due to expire in January 2021, if China does not join it. The head of the arms control department in the Chinese Foreign Ministry responded cynically

that China would be glad to participate in these arms control talks, but only if the United States is willing to reduce its nuclear arsenal to the size of the Chinese arsenal. He added that the United States was using this appeal to China to conceal its goal to add to its stock of weapons, rather than impose restrictions on itself and reduce the number of nuclear weapons.

Given the deterioration in bilateral relations, US statements against Chinese policy, and the change in attitude toward arms control regimes, different ideas are rising among researchers and government officials in China about the national nuclear doctrine: whether the concept that prevailed for many years is still applicable, or whether China should adopt a new and more active policy that will not restrict its nuclear response, for example, if it is attacked with non-nuclear means in a manner that jeopardizes the regime and its nuclear arms strategy. The editor of the *Global Times* daily, regarded as one of the hardline mouthpieces of the Communist Party, wrote recently that those in China who still adhere to the traditional policy were naive. He contended that China should enlarge its nuclear arsenal to 1,000 nuclear warheads and 100 advanced Dongfeng-41 ballistic missiles as soon as possible in order to stand resolutely against the irrational policy of the United States, some of whose leaders were now arguing that nuclear weapons were usable as tactical weapons.

Will the growing hostility between the United States and China lead to an actual change in Chinese policy toward expansion of its nuclear capabilities? The nuclear defense doctrine developed in the 1960s stemmed from fear of an attack by the Soviet Union, not the United States. Concern is now growing in China about a possible regional military conflict with the United States, which in a worst-case scenario is liable to escalate into a nuclear conflict, as part of the expansion of the spheres in dispute between the two powers on core issues, especially in the context of Taiwan and the One China principle. Although the Chinese rarely use military force, and have had extremely limited practical experience with it in recent decades (China was humiliated by Vietnam in its most recent real war in 1979), threats are sounded in Beijing that there will be no way to avoid the use of force in order to maintain the One China principle. This radicalization could affect China's doctrine in the nuclear realm. Reports of internal discussions on nuclear policy are a hint that there are currently leading figures close to President Xi Jinping who support a change in China's longstanding policy, along with other changes he is instituting. It is possible that in the foreseeable future, this will culminate in a decision to expand the Chinese nuclear arsenal.

Significance for Israel

Although Israel is not a signatory to the NPT, it has supported maintaining the treaty as a basis for binding international norms, and participated, together with China and the United States, in shaping the CTBT regulations for preventing nuclear tests. The deep crisis between China and the United States, and the consequent risk that arms control regimes in general, especially in the nuclear realm, will be undermined, is liable to have a negative impact on the cooperation between the major powers that has preserved the existing situation for two decades. If China decides to deviate from its policy of many years by taking steps to enlarge its nuclear arsenal, it will signal to various countries that the rules of the game are still in flux. This will further erode the understandings and norms between all the major powers achieved in recent decades, as occurred in the context of the commitments achieved in the nuclear agreement with Iran. The area around China abounds with countries with nuclear capability, and it is possible that a change in policy and further development of Chinese nuclear weapons and advanced ballistic capabilities will prompt other countries, such as Japan and South Korea, to consider measures for developing capabilities of this kind in the future. Furthermore, Middle East countries, above all Iran, will take advantage of the dissolution of international norms and agreements to continue upgrading their strategic capabilities and to approach the nuclear threshold, thereby aggravating the tension in the region.

Israel, therefore, should enhance its dialogues with the major powers on arms control and nonproliferation, and underscore its concerns about the negative processes underway in the Middle East. Israel should also keep a close watch on the effect of changes in Chinese policy on countries in Asia and the Middle East, including in the context of possible collaboration in the nuclear realm between these countries and China. If necessary, Israel should adjust its policy in order to prevent the diminishing of its unique status and strategic advantage.