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General Zhu's Nuclear Strike Remarks: Reading between the Lines

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On July 14, The Asian Wall Street Journal and The Financial Times reported the apparent remarks made by the People's Liberation Army's Major General Zhu Chenghu, who is also dean of a college at China's National Defence University. Among a series of comments made, General Zhu said: "If the Americans draw their missile and position-guided ammunition into the target zone on the PRC's territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons."

General Zhu's comments created substantial controversy and tension especially at a time when significant attention in Washington is being concentrated on the PRC's military buildup and the proposed takeover of oil company Unocal Corporation by China's state-run CNOOC Ltd. However the more serious political controversy comes from the PRC's commitment to the No First Use (NFU) pledge on nuclear weapons made after its first nuclear weapons test in 1964.

Beijing has been actively issuing official statements asserting General Zhu's remarks as his exclusive personal view and dispelling concerns of a new nuclear stance, while at the same time affirming the PRC's commitment to its NFU pledge. Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing was reported by Xinhua news agency as saying in response that China would not be the first to use nuclear weapons "at any time and under any condition".

Are General Zhu's remarks a sign of a new nuclear weapons doctrine or a difference of opinion between the PLA and leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)?

Minimum Deterrence vs. Limited Deterrence

The PRC currently continues to maintain minimum deterrence as their dominant strategy. Under the minimum deterrence strategy, if the adversary launches a first-strike at the PRC, the PLA will retaliate with an undifferentiated counter value second-strike, aimed at inflicting a level of damage that the adversary deems unacceptable. Therefore the assured level of damage inflicted by the second-strike will in essence deter the first-strike by the adversary, hence achieving a deterrence effect. The minimum deterrence strategy relies on two fundamental factors. First, the PRC has to be able to survive a first-strike initiated by the adversary. Second, the PLA must have the capability to inflict a retaliatory nuclear second-strike of a value that the adversary must consider as unacceptable. Only if the PRC is capable of fulfilling both factors will minimum deterrence be effective in deterring a first-strike by the adversary.

Given the current strategic picture and the PLA's military capabilities, the minimum deterrence strategy will fail to produce optimal deterrence effect. In the present strategic

environment, the United States is the PRC's most threatening opponent; the PRC requires a deterrence strategy that is capable of deterring the US from initiating any military actions against the PRC most probably as a result of Taiwan.

With the current gap in technology and military capability between the US and the PRC, the PLA will fail to fulfill either fundamental factors required to achieve a deterrence effect. As clearly demonstrated during the 1999 war in Yugoslavia, the US along with NATO forces were able to eliminate Serbian military targets primarily with precision bombing. American and NATO forces were able to cripple Serbian command and defence structures without actual force-to-force engagements. Under this scenario, the PLA's strategic infrastructure will not be able to survive a first-strike by the US even if it is executed purely with conventional precision munitions. This will deny the PLA both operational capability and political justification to retaliate with a nuclear second-strike.

Furthermore with the US' initiative to implement a National Missile Defence system (NMD) and a Theatre Missile Defence system (TMD), the PLA's second-strike capability is significantly marginalised. In the unlikely scenario that a number of PLA's delivery sites survive the first-strike, the NMD and the TMD will deny the PLA an effective second-strike. Therefore without the capability to delivery a second-strike of substantial value, minimum deterrence requirements cannot be fulfilled and deterrence cannot be achieved.

Aware of the severe limitations of its minimum deterrence strategy, PLA analysts have been actively promoting limited deterrence as an alternative strategy to minimum deterrence. Limited deterrence is based on the inherent problem that it is difficult to determine the level of damage required that the adversary considers as unacceptable. Therefore in this scenario, the PLA has to develop an effective first-strike advantage such that in times of crisis, the PLA will focus on a nuclear first-strike that attempts to eliminate as many adversary military capabilities as possible, such as the adversaries' nuclear weapons, C⁴I nodes (command, control, communications, computers and intelligence) and other strategic locations so as to reduce the adversaries' military capability. This will effectively reduce the PRC's own casualties and deny victory to the adversary. Under such conditions, deterrence is achieved by crippling the adversary's strategic infrastructure, eliminating the adversaries' second-strike capability and denying the adversary victory.

However, with the PLA's current technological and military capability, an effective deterrence effect still remains unachievable under the limited deterrence strategy. To achieve an optimal deterrence under the limited deterrence strategy, the PLA must have the capability to delivery a precision first-strike that eliminates or at minimum marginalises the adversaries' military capability. The PLA currently still does not have the technology or nuclear stockpile to delivery such an attack. Hence even if the PRC implements limited deterrence as their dominant strategy, deterrence cannot be achieved.

Conclusion

Considering that the PRC clearly lacks the requirements to effectively implement the limited deterrence strategy, what are the motivations for General Zhu's remarks? First, the comments could simply be a careless expression of his personal views or a professional opinion on the direction that the PLA should engage in.

Second, the PLA could be determined to adopt limited deterrence as their new strategic

direction and to build up an effective first-strike capability. If this is so, due to Beijing's NFU pledge, the PLA must be finding it difficult to gain the support and agreement necessary. Therefore the PLA may be using General Zhu's remarks as a form of external pressure on the CCP leadership. This poses serious questions on the relationship between the PLA and Beijing. Such a scenario at its worst may suggest that the CCP might not have absolute control over the PLA. And should this be the case, a lack of effectual control on the PLA raises an assortment of concerns including the probability of a rogue launch.

Finally, the more plausible explanation for General Zhu's remarks is that it could have been part of a political charade by Beijing aimed at the US. In this scenario, the PLA cautions the US of PLA's first-strike option and consideration. This acknowledges the PLA's inability to address the imbalance with either minimum or limited deterrence strategy.

At the same time perceiving that the PLA is unable to survive a first-strike initiated by the adversary, it leaves the only option of an indiscriminate first-strike on the adversaries' cities and military installations that do not require high precision munitions. This sends a clear and strong message to Washington that the PRC is willing to utilise its nuclear stockpile at all cost in reaction to any sign of military intervention in relation to Taiwan and other perceivable military aggression.

This will challenge Washington's resolve in aiding an ally at the cost of domestic casualties, forcing the US to assume any conflict with the PRC to be nuclear in nature. This raises the stakes on both sides that may generate elements of deterrence. If General Zhu's comments were motivated by such intentions, the PLA may have temporarily addressed the imbalance without any severe cost or political backlash.

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