

Transcript of Episode 8, “Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation”

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[Note: This is a rough transcript of the audio recording, based on digital transcription and human review.]

[00:00:00] **Morgan:** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we know this is a difficult time for everyone, so from all of us here at *International Security*, we hope you're staying healthy and safe.

Music: One, two, three, go.

Morgan: Hello. And welcome to *International Security's* Off the Page. Today we are talking about how countries perceive the likelihood of nuclear escalation, with a particular focus on Chinese perceptions of the issue. I'm Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*, and we'll be talking with Professor Fiona Cunningham, coauthor of a recent *International Security* article with Professor Taylor Fravel titled, “Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation.”

And a little later, we'll go off the page with retired Admiral [00:01:00] Cecil Haney, who previously served as commander of United States Strategic Command, and prior to STRATCOM, Admiral Haney served as commander of the United States Pacific Fleet.

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Morgan: Fiona Cunningham is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University.

Dr. Fiona Cunningham, thank you so much for joining us on the show today.

Fiona: Thank you very much for having me. Morgan.

Morgan: Tell us a little bit about what nuclear escalation actually means, and also what is the general lay of the land of how people think about nuclear escalation?

Fiona: So I think there are two ways in which people use the term nuclear escalation.

First is introducing nuclear weapons [00:02:00] into a conflict for the first time. And the second way they use the term nuclear escalation is to refer to a larger scale a use of nuclear weapons than whatever has preceded it.

In general, I think the strategists of nuclear weapons and nuclear conflict tend to look at nuclear escalation in two ways. You have those who think it's controllable, so once you introduce nuclear weapons into a conflict for the first time, you can use them kind of

gradually in a controlled, tit-for-tat way without it sort of exploding into an unlimited use of nuclear weapons where everyone uses everything in their arsenal.

And then you have another group, which we would label the skeptics on controlling nuclear escalation, who tend to view the introduction of nuclear weapons into a conflict as dramatically raising the risk of this explosive escalation where everyone basically uses all of their nuclear weapons that they have in their [00:03:00] arsenals.

Morgan: Right. So what are the implications of being a proponent or a skeptic of whether you can control nuclear escalation? What does it mean to believe that, in the sense of actually what you'd prescribe as behavior in a conflict?

Fiona: I think these two different beliefs, or two different kind of camps, give you quite different prescriptions for the kind of nuclear force that you would want to build.

If you are a proponent and you think nuclear escalation is possible to control, you might view an ideal nuclear force structure as having the ability to conduct limited nuclear operations. So you'd want to have a type of nuclear weapon that's often referred to as a tactical nuclear weapon or a non-strategic nuclear weapon, which is of a lower yield, a shorter range, that allows you to use nuclear weapons in a limited area or a limited number.

And that kind of, I think mode of thinking about nucleus structures tends to think, well, the way that you would [00:04:00] use nuclear weapons in a conflict as either for a coercive advantage or a military advantage, but in order to do so, you not only need these lower level nuclear options, but you also need a strategic nuclear weapons, that's the big city-busting ones, and potentially also the ability to limit and other country's ability to use those weapons against you, so what we call a damage limitation capability.

On the other side of the house, if you are a skeptic, you might still see a role for these tactical or non-strategic nuclear weapons, but it's a much less prominent role than for the proponents. For the skeptics, they tend to be much more focused on having this retaliatory capability at the strategic level that is survivable. Even if another country attacks you with nuclear weapons first, the role of having tactical or non-strategic nuclear weapons for skeptics is really about signaling your level of resolve in a conflict, because you [00:05:00] see the use of those weapons is increasing the risk that you'll fight an all-out nuclear war, and that can give you significant leverage over an adversary.

Morgan: And so of course, this paper is about the Chinese views on nuclear escalation. So what have you and Taylor found in terms of where the Chinese view actually sits on this spectrum?

Fiona: So what we found is that the Chinese views tend to sit on the skeptic side of the spectrum, but they may even go a little bit further towards the skeptical side of the spectrum than the skeptics themselves.

So I'll explain a little bit what I mean by that. One of the central views we found about Chinese views of nuclear escalation is that a lot of Chinese experts seem to think that it's very difficult to control the further use of nuclear weapons once one country uses nuclear

weapons. So you use a tactical or a non-strategic nuclear weapon, and it's very, very, very difficult to stop at that point or to engage in a kind of tit-for-tat, slow burn, back-and-forth contest in the use of nuclear weapons. It's [00:06:00] going to explode something big and very destructive quite quickly.

But the reason that the Chinese views tend to be even more skeptical perhaps than the skeptics is because rather than seeing this rapid escalation from, you know, a limited use of nuclear weapons to the unlimited use of nuclear weapons is something that countries can exploit for bargaining leverage in that typical Schelling-esque fashion, they see it as something that actually constrains leaders from wanting to use or threaten the use of nuclear weapons in the first place and pushes them to look for ways to resolve conflicts at the conventional level when they're faced with a nuclear opponent.

Morgan: So what does this mean then from a policy perspective? Because on the one hand, this actually kind of sounds, sounds great. I mean, it sounds like this means that the Chinese are actually quite conservative when it comes to thinking about the use of nuclear weapons. But then the question is, is does everybody recognize that this is how the Chinese view nuclear escalation, but also is there a [00:07:00] possibility that this is actually dangerous when thinking about interactions with other states' views on nuclear escalation?

Fiona: Well, funny that you should mention other states, Morgan, because Chinese views are quite different from, I think, the way that the United States views the ability to control escalation. I think U.S. analysts, decisionmakers are at least a little bit more willing to try to control escalation using nuclear weapons, and one can see this in the fact that the U.S. still has a large number of non-strategic nuclear weapons in its arsenal, and even recent, as Cold War, planning documents sort of talk about the ability to conduct limited nuclear warfare and try to prevent a nuclear conflict from escalating up to that strategic level.

So there's one difficulty, one thing that's dangerous in the Chinese views because they're not necessarily shared by the United States, and when they're not shared by the United States, that has some consequences, I think, for how the United [00:08:00] States is likely to view Chinese actions and how China thinks about telegraphing what it is planning and what it is thinking to the United States.

So one of the examples that we give in the paper of this sort of dangerous interaction of views between the U.S. and China is that sometimes Chinese analysts will talk about, well, you know, look, if we feel like how our arsenal is being threatened by the United States, we might do things that signal our resolve, we might be driving out nuclear missiles around or engage in some sort of signaling to show that, you know, we will retaliate if you try to attack us with nuclear weapons first. And the United States might view that as preparations for China using nuclear weapons first because it considers limited nuclear use as something possible. It suspects that's something Beijing might consider doing if it felt desperate enough in a future contingency. So it's that kind of misperception piece.

Morgan: So how do [00:09:00] you know these are Chinese views? I mean, as we all know, one of the difficult things with doing research on the Chinese government is actually trying to get an understanding of what actual policy is due to a lack of transparency. So tell us a

little bit more about how you and Taylor came to understand these Chinese views on nuclear escalation.

Fiona: Well, I have to start by saying that this was a pretty challenging task for the two of us to take on. And we tried to approach it with a degree of humility because obviously getting at Chinese official views on this question is extremely difficult to the point of potentially being impossible from the official sense. So nevertheless, we sort of tried to do our best with the available sources to open-source researchers about some of these questions.

And I would just add that since we are talking about the realm of a hypothetical future conflict, it's very difficult for *anybody* to know how Chinese leaders might actually react to some of these pressures in a future conflict, so there's a big sort of unknown within that space. But the way that we [00:10:00] approached this question was, I think to adopt some of the best practices with Chinese foreign policy research, which is to try to combine a pretty rigorous review of what print sources were available on the topic with expert interviews within China, and obviously there are questions one cannot answer in interviews or that would not be answered for reasons of sensitivity, reasons of classification, and sometimes even just knowledge on the part of one's interviewees. And we were able to supplement some of those gaps with looking at some of the print sources that are available.

And one thing that was striking actually is that there was a pretty strong degree of consensus among those that we were able to speak to about these questions that nuclear escalation would be really a difficult thing to control once our nuclear weapons had been used.

Morgan: Great. Well, Fiona, I only have one more question for you, and that is, are you ready?

Fiona: Am I ready for what?

Morgan: To go [00:11:00] off the page.

Fiona: Oh, yeah.

Morgan: If you enjoy listening to Off the Page, you'll enjoy reading our quarterly journal *International Security*, which is edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. To learn more about the journal, please check out our website at belfercenter.org/is.

Admiral Cecil Haney has four decades of experience in the United States Navy and has previously served as commander of United States Strategic Command as well as commander of the United States Pacific Fleet. Admiral Haney is currently a member of the Center for a New American Security's board of directors.

Admiral Haney, welcome to the show. We're very happy to have you here. It's probably good to go ahead and start by hearing your views based on your experience in understanding Chinese nuclear strategy and also its approaches to escalation.

Haney: Well, thank you Morgan, and I just [00:12:00] want to say this is a subject area that I think really requires more attention, so I'm, I'm really happy that you are entertaining a session on this because for my experience, a lot of times we like to segregate our look at China into an a conventional bin and a nuclear bin almost as a subset, not as big a deal as I would say. We need to keep both in our thinking going forward.

You know, in this day and age where we have threats associated with the information domain, threats associated with cyberspace, the nuclear problem has not gone away. And China, I think, has been very attuned to that frequency, such that they have invested heavily into modernizing their capability, and they are continuing to grow it. So it definitely behooves us to look at how they may play their nuclear cards in a crisis and where we have a friction point or into a major war [00:13:00] with China. How will that work?

Morgan: And so what do you see as the main issues in terms of understanding Chinese views towards how it would use nuclear weapons in a crisis, right? I mean, in a lot of ways there's a lot of lack of transparency in this particular issue area.

Haney: Yes. And it's not only just the lack of transparency, but there's also what I call a lot of what are the old literature versus what is modern thinking, and as China further increases their conventional as well as cyberspace capabilities, I think the business of thinking of them statically in the nuclear dimension can lead us into a big problem areas. So this is something that I fundamentally feel we have to integrate into our thinking, into our approaches, into our plans going forward.

Fiona: Admiral Haney, I wanted to thank you so much for coming on the show to discuss with me and die in the absence of my coauthor Taylor Fravel, some of these questions about nuclear escalation from the Chinese [00:14:00] perspective, but just to pose one of the things that we have found in our research, which is that China has looked at the building out of a counterspace capability, its conventional missile capability, and its offensive cyber capability is a way that it can pressure the United States potentially in a conflict without needing to reach for its nuclear weapons, which obviously comes with some issues because of the ways that those different areas are linked into the nuclear piece of a future U.S.-China confrontation, if one should, God forbid, occur. And so I'm curious to hear your views on whether you think the U.S. and China think about the integration of nuclear and these non-nuclear capabilities in a similar way.

Haney: A good question, Fiona. I would just say, yeah. I think it would be a mistake that think we think of it in a similar way. And because Chinese culture is different, the China problem is different as they go forward. It's a communist country. [00:15:00] Whereas we look at things, we'll look at them through an American lens.

With that said though, I think both countries have a very integrated thinking going on today in terms of these areas, nuclear, space, cyber. And as you mentioned that the investment in conventional missiles by China has been huge over the timeframe, but China has also reorganized their organizational structure so that it too, is different.

And quite frankly, they are really looking at the problem in it. I think an integrated way, even though they won't advertise publicly because of their transparent nature of where the nuclear piece fits into all this, I think they will keep it publicly as a very segregated, isolated thing. But I doubt if they're thinking that way.

Morgan: Well, so that's interesting that they seem to be wanting to keep under wraps or kind of behind the curtain, what the actual thinking is on nuclear use. What is the kind of logic behind that? Because thinking of it from a broader [00:16:00] perspective of having a nuclear arsenal in order to deter or even coerce, you want people to know exactly what you have and how you're going to use it.

Is there any way we can kind of talk about why do you think things are kept behind the curtain in terms of Chinese views on nuclear weapons, and whether it's actually purposeful or not would be very interesting?

Fiona: I can take a stab at this, as someone who I guess has tried to study this along with my coauthor. I think part of it is not wanting to reveal plans to what China still perceives to be a stronger adversary in the United States, although of course the conventional balance is changing, so not revealing weaknesses that China worries could perhaps be exploited by an adversary. But certainly in some earlier work, Taylor Fravel and I also discovered that there were aspects of kind of strategic ambiguity in how China, for example, would talk about when it might think about an attack strictly [00:17:00] using conventional military capabilities that affected its nuclear weapons as a, as nuclear first use for, for the purposes of retaliating with a nuclear capability versus a non-nuclear capability. And just as a quick aside, China has had this pledge publicly that it wouldn't threaten to use nuclear weapons unless it was first attacked with nuclear weapons.

So that there is some ambiguity over exactly how that applies in practice that I think is a dangerous gamble in in some ways, but you know, the degree to which they think they are intentionally not talking about aspects of their nuclear weapons capability. I think it, it has to do probably with both this legacy of being a weaker player as well as trying to reach some of the deterrence benefits of being ambiguous about what they would actually do.

Morgan: Admiral, what is your view on Fiona's take on this? And it's especially interesting because you were commander of STRATCOM. You were commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. [00:18:00] In many ways, if the Chinese were looking to maintain some form of strategic ambiguity, it would be directed precisely at you.

Haney: Well, first I want to say, while I have commanded the U.S. Strategic Command and U.S. Pacific Fleet, these views are my own today because I would like to give those commands the prerogative of what they're doing and what they're thinking and not really linked to me today. But I agree with what Fiona has described there. I really think, you know, the Chinese and their culture, and they're thinking sort of in the Sun Tzu methodology, they're they would like to win without fighting.

So if they are able to, as they increase their conventional capability, as they increase their capability strategically in these areas, nuclear, space, cyber, but particularly in the nuclear

piece, they try to maintain their upper hand. It gives them an advantage by playing the ambiguity advantage, if you will, and keeping their cards close hole.

Because with that, it gets them to, at [00:19:00] least in their thinking, perhaps win without fighting, by being a deterrent, while they have less nuclear capability, of course, than what the United States has. I do believe, as Fiona talked about their no first use policy, what does it really mean in peacetime versus what does it mean in the heightened conflict, and what does it mean in wartime?

I think the Chinese probably also have red lines associated with that and perhaps have advanced thinking that we don't know about them in that regard. So we can't just think of them statically, and we can't think of them statically as they're increasing their both conventional as well as nuclear capability.

Morgan: I'm curious, Fiona, how does Chinese views on the ability to control escalation from conventional to nuclear change in this kind of scenario Admiral Haney is talking about, about when actually a conflict of re-ups or crisis erupts? Does this Chinese view on control actually go out the window?

Fiona: Right. So just one thing to clarify really quickly, what our research [00:20:00] suggested is that China was perhaps more confident about and has devoted a lot of attention to researching and thinking about controlling escalation in a purely conventional conflict to higher levels of intensity, but we're much less confident and actually quite skeptical that once the nuclear weapon were used, that further escalation in the use of nuclear weapons or the further use of nuclear weapons could actually be controlled. And so that was quite an interesting contrast that, you know, one country would nevertheless have quite different views above and below the nuclear threshold and thinking of escalation control.

And so of course, any country that has nuclear weapons can change the way that they might think about using them in a conflict. But that is dependent upon how they have practiced their operations and how the routines that their forces sort of been rehearsing for prior to that point. So I think that does create some constraints on what China could do [00:21:00] in any given conflict, but with regards to their beliefs, I think this is a really interesting and important question. I think the fear that and nuclear use could escalate very quickly to unlimited nuclear use is probably something that's not likely to change too much in a conflict.

I think if anything were to happen, then those views would be reinforced when leaders are sort of faced with that reality. But China's views about conventional escalation, I think, could change in a future conflict scenario when they realize that ideas of war control, these things that the military researchers have been writing about in theory, are quite different when you find yourself in a confrontation with a very capable adversary, information systems that may be not available, et cetera. And another interesting aspect of why China's views of escalation might change in a crisis or a conflict has to do with their assessments about what the U.S. would be willing [00:22:00] to do on behalf of adversaries. In some of our findings, experts suggested to us that the United States would probably try to stop its conflict that

was involving an ally or an adversary from escalating to a point where nuclear weapons became part of the picture, something that the two sides were thinking of, and would put pressure on its allies to sort of bow out of a conflict before that ended up occurring. And I think that Chinese leaders and commanders may be quite surprised at the levels of U.S. resolve to protect its allies in a future conflict.

Haney: While I agree with Fiona, I want to really highlight a couple of things. China has been very vocal on their informational campaign and really exercising themselves in the information sphere. So I think we have to be very careful in terms of what they say versus what they do. It is interesting that I sometimes think: Would they really be modernizing and diversifying their nuclear capability if they were [00:23:00] solely into this no first use, and we have the segregation between conventional and nuclear, or is that what they want us to think? So I think we have to be careful given how they have really put a lot of energy into their informational campaign, point one.

Point two is, as we look at this, it is also a function of perception. It's not so black and white. Then you can segregate perceived actions without a deeper understanding of what do they consider as narrow up terminology, win-win versus lose-lose. It's any kind of increased crisis. I think this whole business of these perceptions will create misunderstandings and can further aggravate an escalation ladder going forward.

So we just have to be careful of looking at the U.S. one way in China and the other way, there's such a black and white continuity in terms of control of conventional [00:24:00] escalation versus nuclear escalation. I think both countries understand that nuclear use is messy. It's ugly. And quite frankly, I don't think either country wants to just go to the nuclear weapon, a detonation, whether tactically or strategically or going forward.

So, just, I think that's also part of that mosaic as we look at this.

Morgan: What sort of mechanisms are in place in a potential crisis, or in a lead up to a crisis, to ensure that, you know, there aren't misunderstandings or that escalation isn't reached inadvertently? We have the famous stories of the red phone with a direct line between the U.S. and Moscow during the Cold War, but how do China and the United States communicate with each other to potentially avoid nuclear escalation or escalation even conventionally, and is the current state of affairs in terms of these mechanisms satisfactory? What are areas for improvement?

Haney: Yes. I think that's an excellent question. In terms of things, you know, when I was [00:25:00] commander of U.S. Strategic Command, I would have loved to have had a red phone or something to, to talk to my counterpart. I even wanted to go over and visit China. I did get to visit China during my Pacific Fleet tour, because I think very important in terms of using peacetime or quasi-peacetime, but particularly to keep the linkages in terms of communications at various levels. I would say we were not so good at that when it comes to China, as you compare it to the Russia ability, but remember that too was at the highest levels of our, of our government.

So maybe there is some patience required there, but when you look at not just nuclear, cyber, space, you can have a misperception that leads into something bigger or, even in terms of reactions to things like the rite of passage in the South China Sea. So this piece of having more communication channels, I think is very important.

I know from a cyber perspective, there was some work to [00:26:00] establish some of that, but I'm not in a good position today to say how well is that working in terms of things, and I sort of feel from the war on trade that's ongoing right now that we probably are talking less in terms of military to military than we were in the past in that regard.

Fiona: Just to go back to this point about a modernization that Admiral Haney made a moment ago, if there were more robust discussions between the United States and China on these issues, at the official level, it would be easy to say, well, what is a deception and what China might be doing in their management of the information space versus what is sincere. And I think there are some impediments to these kinds of discussions on the Chinese side as well, because of the way that organizations are siloed to research or understand nuclear issues within the People's Republic of China.

So those that operate the nuclear force and those who have sort of influence over the high-level [00:27:00] strategy planning, et cetera, come from quite different communities that can make it quite difficult when even you get into a situation of speaking to two experts as a Taylor Fravel and I did for our paper.

There are gaps in their knowledge about what the nuclear force is doing that I think is sincere as opposed to deception. So their community in many ways, isn't ideally structured to engage in the kinds of dialogues and discussions that I think would help manage some of the conflict risks in the U.S.-China relationship related to nuclear.

Haney: Yeah. And also, as we look at the, that communications linkage, I think it too has to be a sort of multi-domain in its thinking. As we look at the spectrum of conflict and escalation, I am firmly a believer of you can poke at a competitor or an adversary in a way, in one area that can provoke them in another.

[00:28:00] For example, we look at things, for example, dumbed down to the dime, diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. So if a friction is going on in the economic sphere, it may in fact produce an output in the military sphere, so we have to really be ready for escalation in all of those and ready to participate in that sport in a collaborative manner, in real time. And then as we look at this, for example, strictly in the military side, looking at China and their commingling and the strategic rocket forces of their capability, nuclear and conventional, while you may argue that looking at a B-52, it has a dual role in its capability, I think that too can create mixed signaling that further puts an exclamation mark on why we need a better communications, particularly at the highest levels, so that they can quickly be digested and understood as best we can.

Morgan: That's a fascinating point, or the idea that it's hard enough thinking about potential [00:29:00] miscalculation, miscommunication and escalation dynamics in the military front, but especially once you're factoring in all these other issue areas of competition, in some

ways, it almost magnifies the potential for escalation or inadvertent spreading of conflict. So that brings up an interesting question, which, by the way, I promise I will follow up with a more positive question, which is what are probably the more likely scenarios, kind of the scarier scenarios we can imagine where escalation can happen?

Is it over Taiwan? Is it over the South China Sea, or is it something that happens elsewhere? You know, what are the biggest opportunities for miscalculation?

Fiona: From my perspective, I would still think that the, the most concerning contingencies between the U.S. and China, usually all of them would involve an ally in some way, or a partner in some way coming into conflict with Chinese interests, whether it's Japan, Taiwan, or one of the U.S.' allies in [00:30:00] Southeast Asia.

But you know, from the Chinese perspective, when asked to do any of these interactions or flashpoints have a nuclear component, they'll frequently say, you know, "not from our perspective," not, they're not things that we would consider using a nuclear weapons in, unless of course with threatened attacked first.

So in many ways, they may put out these signals, but even sort of looking at how some of the military writings talk about conventional conflicts that had gone badly from the Chinese perspective. And they don't talk about specific ones, whether that would be in Taiwan, whether that would be the Korean peninsula.

The idea of escalating out of a conflict by threatening to use nuclear weapons doesn't necessarily get mentioned, certainly not to the degree that one might see in Russian writings from say the early 2000s, and of course one has to take these things with a grain of salt, but one of the things that comes up frequently, I think can a Taiwan contingency from the perspective of [00:31:00] Chinese writers is that they are thinking about these conflicts or contingencies as limited wars, and they're thinking about what happens the day after the conflict, you know, what are the political ramifications of using nuclear threats to alter the way that any of those conflicts would end, and ultimately coming down to the conclusion that threatening to use nuclear weapons may not be the right sort of solution to that kind of a contingency, but rather one can [have] patience and wait to fight the contingency again.

So I think nuclear weapons have a place in all of them, but from the Chinese perspective, they're downplaying the significance of those capabilities, or certainly the intentional threats of use.

Haney: I think what the Fiona has done in this paper, and what she's written also with Taylor, also gives more a breadth in terms of what she just said. I would say I'm the first person that would say, "Hard to pinpoint the [00:32:00] most likely scenario," because the history has shown usually we get that wrong. You have to think about an anchor some of the thinking in those. This is a business of having a reaction to something involving one of our allies and partners, I would have to agree.

The one piece that I don't think we've talked about, and sometimes we talk about this nuclear use as strictly a detonation, and I would argue that nuclear use is, is ongoing every

day with countries that have nuclear weapons. They're moving them around and they're testing their capability and what have you there.

And that in itself can clog up the thinking in terms of an approach that the U.S. might want to use in the future relative to watching some of the activities associated with, or the lack of information associated with, Chinese nuclear forces. So this piece, I am a firm believer that nuclear weapons are part of that deterrence equation every [00:33:00] day.

And these countries are, are watching each other to such an extent that we have to be careful with misperceptions even from that standpoint before we think about the traditional escalation ladder. I hope that makes sense in what I call the monitoring of day to day operations and how are they different.

When it comes to the “boom” part, even though Chinese do not openly talk about the electromagnetic effects with nuclear weapons, but if they were in a bind and losing Taiwan or something like that, I'm not sure that no first use of a nuclear weapon over what they consider is their territory, Taiwan, would be in the traditional no first use definition perhaps in their thinking. So we have to consider that aspect as well.

Fiona: So this is a really interesting and important point to, to discuss, and Admiral Haney's point about the electromagnetic pulse, a detonation as being perhaps a way out of a more, I [00:34:00] guess, I hate to say this, but more destructive uses of the “boom”. But one of the interesting sources that Taylor and I uncovered while we were researching this paper was a thesis that was written by a missile force officer, which actually suggested this as a limited first use kind of a campaign, if China was losing in a Taiwan contingency. What was curious about this suggestion is that the thesis was published at roughly the same time as other sources that China's missile forces had put out, which talked about things like lowering the threshold for nuclear use, but didn't actually describe what that meant, what that would look like, would it be a bluff, at a time when I think the Chinese strategists would be debating whether their no first use policy, coupled with a small arsenal, was going to be sufficient to deter the kinds of threats that China was likely to face in the future. I think what's important to consider when looking at those [00:35:00] sources is that they took place when China didn't have any satellite capabilities of a conventional nature, the same offensive cyber operations, or even the conventional missile force that it has today, plus it was much weaker. And so therefore these things were sort of suggested at times when China was conventionally a lot weaker and had fewer options than it might today to think about how it could walk up the escalation ladder to try to end a conflict that wasn't going well.

And of course, as Admiral Haney suggested, if they have those capabilities, then there's always a possibility that they might use them, but they may be gambling that there's less of a chance they need to reach that high. Today is in the past, and I think all these things really turn on Chinese judgments about U.S. resolve in a lot of these conflicts that could take place in the Indo-Pacific and judgments about the degree of resolve or interest that the U.S. holds in the region. I think it's [00:36:00] changing is the relationship becomes more competitive.

Morgan: So what's the good news? Where's the, where's the point of optimism? You know, we've been, we've been talking a lot about, you know, the difficulties of controlling the

escalation ladder and about the, the threats of misperception and how things may unravel in a crisis. But there must be some good news.

Haney: Well, there's always some good news in everything. Yeah, I think the one piece that I'd like to shed some light on is first just start thinking and the, the rigor that's starting to move forward and looking at this very hard problem. When I first took over as commander of U.S. Strategic Command in 2013, I was really concerned that we didn't have enough attention to this problem universal, you know, because we were still sort of hanging on to the Prague speech that President Obama had given, the New START treaty, and this whole piece of it looked like we had a direction of the world moving toward free of nuclear weapons. And with that I was [00:37:00] concerned that there wasn't enough rigor going on in the thinking of, what are alternative scenarios?

So this work that, for example, Fiona has been doing and highlighting, I really applaud because when I was at Strategic Command, one of the things I tried to put together was an academic alliance with various universities because I really wanted a more brains going on, and you know, in the academia world of our elite universities and what have you. I really think there was an unharnessed brainpower that could be brought to it. So by the time I left, we had about 34 academic institutions that were working, looking at strategic deterrence in the 21st century. So although that's more at large, I think that's the good news is that we are paying attention to this more than we were in 2013 and we must, and with that, we will come to a future of I think dealing with this escalation problem even more professionally. We have to [00:38:00] recognize the problem and then provide solutions. And as we described here today, this business of working those communication channels, I personally am optimistic that those will come as we go forward. But the question for me is always on the negative side.

Are they going to come fast enough? And that piece, the other part of the good news is with that piece, tabletop exercises and war games and those kinds of things of thinking through this I think is ongoing. And, consequently, that too a good news. You can't not recognize the problem, and doing that will help us think about this more fluidly going forward.

Fiona: From my perspective, I'm so pleased that Admiral Haney brought up that moment around 2012 when there was less thinking on these questions going on in the midst of Obama's Prague speech, because it was actually in the midst of working on aspects of that problem from the perspective of, you know, what would extended deterrence look like in East Asia or [00:39:00] in a disarmed world that I came across a lot of these questions and decided that I wanted to write a PhD dissertation on this and research it. So, so it's an interesting kind of, of synergy. That was the moment for me in thinking that this was an important problem that was under-studied. But to highlight some of, I think, the good news, I think one is that since the end of the Cold War, China has been envisaging its future conflicts as limited wars, so it doesn't see the United States as an existential threat. And I think that that's a good thing that sets the U.S.-China relationship in the nuclear piece in quite a different light to what the Cold War experience or even the U.S.-Russia relationship presently might look like.

I think the second bit of good news is that, for the moment, China's nuclear arsenal is relatively small, and that comes with obviously some other problems or risks because it means the arsenal is perhaps a little bit more vulnerable, [00:40:00] but it doesn't have the kinds of pressures to use or lose a very large arsenal for a damage-limiting strike, so the idea that you would destroy a lot of the U.S.'s force before it could attack you is just not a part of China's doctrine at the moment.

And I think that's one sort of nuclear risk that doesn't necessarily exist. China in the nonnuclear pieces is becoming a little bit, I think, more vulnerable to things like counter-space attacks or cyberattacks, and I think that leads to a little bit more caution than perhaps we might have seen from China in the past on those areas.

But perhaps the most important bit of good news is that there are opportunities to, to research and to continue to interact with some Chinese experts on their thinking on these areas. And that is the sort of brains and start of a greater transparency and better communication, I think, [00:41:00] between the two countries.

Morgan: Well, both of you provided a ton of great insight. Admiral, we have a little bit of a tradition here on the show. When we thank a guest, we like to ask them what advice they have to give to young scholars, practitioners, service members as they begin their careers, which we think is extremely valuable given someone with your experience.

Haney: Well, thank you for that question and just the opportunity to be a part of this. The first piece for me in response to that would be a career field in this area of nuclear deterrence and all the parts and pieces associated with that, whether you're a physicist or a material scientist to a, a policy person, military, et cetera, that not to shy away from this.

We had a period where this was sort of like kryptonite, if you will, in terms of career fields, where in fact, quite frankly, when you look at the essential threat to our way of life, our nation, and what have you, it's something [00:42:00] that as long as countries have this capability, we really have to keep people understanding it, diving into it, studying it, and what have you there, so I think Fiona's example is perfect in this regard.

I also think we have to be careful as practitioners, scholars, policymakers, service members to segregate the nuclear and conventional in such a way to think we can have that Nirvana. War is messy, and consequently we have to think of the alternative scenarios through as we enter a conflict and clearly as we work our way through a campaign. So I think that part is a very important.

And then the last piece I would tell them is to be careful with calling things non-strategic and strategic, if they're a nuclear weapon. Quite frankly, a nuclear weapon, if it goes "boom", that may look like it came from a tactical thing, but it will still have a significant [00:43:00] strategic effect for days to come in that regard.

And I do have one last one, and that would be to master a deterrence thinking for this 21st century, as well as non-proliferation. We need both.

Morgan: Terrific. Well, thank you so much, Admiral Haney, for joining us and for your insights, and thank you, Fiona, as well for your paper with Taylor and providing such an excellent foundation for a great conversation. So thank you to you both.

Fiona: Thank you, Admiral, and thank you, Morgan.

Haney: Thank you. And keep the papers coming!

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