Miscalculation Scare:
Why ASBM and CPGS Weapons Will Not Increase Nuclear Escalation Risk

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Chinese ‘Populist’ conceptualisation of U.S. nuclear use after a Chinese ASBM launch

• 1, Incorrect Early Warning: The U.S. mistakenly sees a ‘(nuclear) ICBM’ coming instead of a (conventional MRBM/IRBM); so it retaliates.

• 2, Prefect Nuclear Umbrella: The U.S. provides extended deterrence to its aircraft carriers so when attacked by whatever means, it retaliates with nuclear weapons.

• 3, Inadvertent Nuclear War: Due to the ‘nuclear-conventional commingling’ features of ASBMs, the U.S. mistakenly attacks nuclear systems when it attempts to pre-empt ASBM launches. Facing a seemingly successful disarming first strike, the Chinese initiates nuclear ‘retaliations’. The U.S. retaliates later.
The particularities of these ‘Populist’ escalation pathways

• 1, Do not understand how the U.S. early warning system works. Think that the U.S. nuclear force is ‘trigger-easy’ (error-prone, automatic nuclear responses).

• 2, Do not understand how the U.S. extended deterrence works. Think that the U.S. nuclear force is ‘trigger-happy’ (deliberate nuclear responses).

• 3, Do not consider the Chinese nuclear force to be nuclear/conventionally invulnerable.
U.S. conceptualisation of nuclear uses introduced by CPGS strikes

- Warhead Ambiguity: Thinking they are nuclear-armed.

- Destination Ambiguity: Thinking they are attacking major nuclear powers instead of terrorist targets.

- Target Ambiguity: Thinking they are attacking nuclear forces instead of A2AD/ASAT/conventional targets.

(Categorisation according to James Acton, *Silver Bullet*, 2013)
The particularities of these U.S. proposed escalation pathways

• Do not consider the Chinese nuclear force to be nuclear/conventionally invulnerable.
Commonalities:

• Accept the existence of an American nuclear war-fighting/war-winning superiority.

• Accept that the Chinese nuclear forces are vulnerable to conventional/nuclear first-strikes.

• But: why the U.S. experts still concern about ‘nuclear escalation’? Why not view ‘the greatly reduced Chinese nuclear retaliation’ as acceptable? Isn’t it a ‘successful damage limitation’?
Commonalities:

- Accept the existence of an American nuclear war-fighting/war-winning superiority.
- Argue that MAD is a fact today between China and the U.S.
- Accept that the Chinese nuclear forces are vulnerable to conventional/nuclear first strikes.
- Consider the Chinese nuclear forces survivable to both conventional and nuclear pre-emption.
- But: why the U.S. experts still concern about ‘nuclear escalation’? Why not view ‘the greatly reduced Chinese nuclear retaliation’ as acceptable? Isn’t it a ‘successful damage limitation’? Then why the Chinese escalate so easily?
Possible Explanation?

Total Chinese nuclear force in peacetime

Reduced Chinese nuclear force after the U.S. first strikes

‘Unacceptable damage’ in Chinese force requirements

‘Unacceptable damage’ in the U.S. force requirements

Is there ‘an acceptable (nuclear) damage level’ for the U.S. government at all?
Implications and Questions

• Without dominance at the highest rung of nuclear escalation, escalation control and war-termination at favourable terms at lower conflict intensity will be elusive if not impossible. More and superior flexible response and selective/tailored options will not help.

• How can the U.S. conduct escalation control when it only accepts 0 chance of nuclear attacks? Will ballistic missile defence or any defence preparations help at all?

• Should we publicly acknowledge the U.S. nuclear war-fighting superiority? Does it matter? What about the worries concerning ‘the Chinese sprint to parity’?
Implications and Questions

• If there is an acknowledged imbalance of resolves, due to the Sino-American imbalance of interest in West Pacific regions, should the U.S. increase its nuclear superiorities further to compensate that?

• What about other possibly painful consequences: global economic chaos, global cyber breakdown, massive orbital debris, environmental disasters...?

• Should we welcome the Chinese trade crisis instability for arm race instability, when the U.S. escalation control works in the future?