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Inflating the China Threat

By Stephen Walt
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If you were focusing on Hurricane Isaac or the continued violence in Syria, you might have missed the latest round of threat inflation about China. Last week, the *New York Times* **reported** that China was "increasing its existing ability to deliver nuclear warheads to the United States and to overwhelm missile defense systems." The online journal *Salon* offered an even more breathless appraisal: the headline announced a "big story"--that "**China's missiles could thwart U.S.**"--and the text offered the alarming forecast that "the United States may be falling behind China when it comes to weapon technology."

What is really going on here? Not much. China presently has a modest strategic nuclear force. It is believed to have only about 240 nuclear warheads, and only a handful of its ballistic missiles can presently reach the United States. By way of comparison, the United States has over 2000 operational nuclear warheads deployed on ICBMs, SLBMs, and cruise missiles, all of them capable of reaching China. And if that were not enough, the U.S. has nearly 3000 nuclear warheads in reserve.

Given its modest capabilities, China is understandably worried by U.S. missile defense efforts. Why? Chinese officials worry about the scenario where the United States uses its larger and much more sophisticated nuclear arsenal to launch a first strike, and then relies on ballistic missile defenses to deal with whatever small and ragged second-strike the Chinese managed to muster. (Missile defenses can't handle large or sophisticated attacks, but in theory they might be able to deal with a small and poorly coordinated reply).

This discussion is all pretty **Strangelovian**, of course, but nuclear strategists get paid to think about all sorts of elaborate and far-fetched scenarios. In sum, those fiendish Chinese are doing precisely what any sensible power would do: they are trying to preserve their own second-strike

deterrent by modernizing their force, to include the development of multiple-warhead missiles that would be able to overcome any defenses the United States might choose to build. As the *Wall Street Journal* **put it:**

The [Chinese] goal is to ensure a secure second-strike capability that could survive in the worst of worst-case conflict scenarios, whereby an opponent would not be able to eliminate China's nuclear capability by launching a first strike and would therefore face potential retaliation. As the U.S. Defense Department's Ballistic Missile Defense Review points out, "China is one of the countries most vocal about U.S. ballistic missile defenses and their strategic implications, and its leaders have expressed concern that such defenses might negate China's strategic deterrent."

Three further points should be kept in mind. First, hawks are likely to use developments such as these to portray China as a rising revisionist threat, but such claims do not follow logically from the evidence presented. To repeat: what China is doing is a sensible defensive move, motivated by the same concerns for deterrent stability that led the United States to create a "strategic triad" back in the 1950s.

Second, if you wanted to cap or slow Chinese nuclear modernization, the smart way to do it would be to abandon the futile pursuit of strategic missile defenses and bring China into the same negotiating framework that capped and eventually reduced the U.S. and Russian arsenals. And remember: once nuclear-armed states have secure second-strike capabilities, the relative size of their respective arsenals is irrelevant. If neither side can prevent the other from retaliating and destroying its major population centers, it simply doesn't matter if one side has twice as many warheads before the war. Or ten times as many. Or a hundred times....

Third, this episode reminds us that trying to protect the country by building missile defenses is a fool's errand. It is always going to be cheaper for opponents to come up with ways to override a missile defense. Why? Because given how destructive nuclear weapons are, a missile defense system has to work almost perfectly in order to prevent massive damage. If you fired a hundred warheads and 95% were intercepted -- an astonishingly high level of performance -- that would still let five warheads through and that means losing five cities. And if an opponent were convinced that your defenses would work perfectly -- a highly unlikely proposition -- there are plenty of other ways to deliver a nuclear weapon. Ballistic missile defense never made much sense either strategically or economically, except as a make-work program for the aerospace industry and an enduring component of right-wing nuclear theology.