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RAND's 'Unthinkable' war with China

BY PETER LEE

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A new study by the RAND Corporation for US Army presents questionable assumptions while examining a possible long and severe or short US-China war. In a sinister way, it focuses on the military and economic losses and costs and ignores the tragic impact of such a conflict on the people of these two nations and even those beyond. The study assumes the war won't involve other powers, would remain confined to East Asia and no nuclear weapons would be used. It only proves that Pentagon is planning and preparing for a war with China.

RAND recently issued a report on war with China, *Thinking the Unthinkable*. In my opinion, it didn't do a good enough job, unthinkable-wise.



US Navy ships operate in formation in the South China Sea in this file photo

RAND assumes, as do many US reports, that any clash with the People's Republic of China (PRC) will be not too unthinkable, fought exclusively in Asia, and inevitably end with the US prevailing.

And conventional weapons only. No nukes!

It cannot be entirely excluded that the Chinese leadership would decide that only the use of nuclear weapons would prevent total defeat and the state's destruction. However, even under such desperate conditions, the resort to nuclear weapons would not be China's only option.

According to RAND the optimal cost-benefit scenario for the PRC: Surrender!

It could instead accept defeat. Indeed, because U.S. nuclear retaliation would make the destruction of the state and collapse of the country all the more certain, accepting defeat would be a better option (depending on the severity of U.S. terms) than nuclear escalation. This logic, along with China's ingrained no-first-use policy, suggests that Chinese first use is most improbable.

Unsurprisingly, all of RAND's scenarios are pretty sunny, for the simple reason that, with nukes out of the picture, conventional war will be fought and won over the Chinese homeland while the closest US civilians will come to the conflict will be Wolf Blitzer and CNN.

And the Chinese would be good with that, at least according to RAND. Hey, America's destroying our country, but we'll take a beating, capitulate, and accept the national humiliation of submitting to the superior force of the United States.

RAND is welcome to assume that Xi Jinping's response to its steel-trap logic will be to order a crash textile program to supply white flags to China's 1.3 billion citizens and prison uniforms for its 86 million Communist Party members.

Not my take.

Bear in mind that Mao Zedong rolled the dice against the US in regional conflicts during the Korean and Vietnam War period, when the apparent disparity of forces was a lot greater. That's the precedent and legacy Xi Jinping will be trying to live up to.

But more importantly, bear in mind that the PRC is a rather shaky multi-ethnic regime and it is not interested in a conventional war probably accompanied by Taiwan independence, the secession of Hong Kong, and insurrection, West-aided or not, in Tibet and Xinjiang.

Therefore, the PRC may find it necessary to threaten escalation to Armageddon to deter the possibility of a "limited" "conventional" US attack that would pose an existential threat to the regime as surely as a nuclear fusillade.

This assumption of Chinese restraint, in other words, is not convincing:

As low as the probability of Chinese first use is, even in the most desperate circumstances of a prolonged and severe war, the United States could make it lower still by exercising great care

with regard to the extensiveness of homeland attacks and by avoiding altogether targets that the Chinese could interpret as critical to their deterrent.

The most plausible scenario to me is not that the CCP says, Relax! It's just a conventional attack! Nothing to do with our strategic deterrent! And allows the US to kick its behind.

The PRC can and, I expect, may announce it will impute nuclear intentions to any attack against PRC homeland targets. It isn't that hard since the US is apparently incapable of renouncing first strike doctrine, and the US military has inevitably compensated for the erosion of its in-theater conventional advantage by tiptoeing into the realm of dual use i.e. deploying weapons systems that can be construed to be carrying nuclear as well as conventional weapons into the Asian theater.

The PRC can point to the fact that the US Air Force has decided in its wisdom to go ahead with the B61-12 "smart" a.k.a. guided nuclear bomb with dialable yields up to 50 kilotons. It's deliverable by stealth fighter, which makes a mockery of the idea that it's a strategic weapon. It'll be ready in 2020, just about the time the US, according to RAND, has to start getting worried about PRC conventional parity.

And if there are worries that the F-35 stealth fighter might have trouble penetrating PRC air defense to deliver its payload, let's see if the US goes ahead with the "LRSO", the "Long Range Stand Off" nuclear cruise missile, also stealthy, also with dialable yield, also capable of carrying a conventional as well as nuclear payload, to be dropped off a stealth bomber beyond the range of PRC A2D2 (anti-access/area denial strategy) capabilities.

Tactical nuclear war is clearly on the Air Force agenda, not just in its choice of armaments but also in its choice of doctrine. Apparently there is a "nuclear use" war-fighting phase which is, somehow, not "nuclear war," and that is the sweet spot in which the tactical nukes would be used without, at least in the mind of the Air Force, triggering a strategic launch against the US.

The Federation of American Scientists provided a useful analysis of the Pentagon's tilt toward nuclear use as a regional deterrent i.e. not just for homeland-to-homeland mutual assured destruction scenarios. I would speculate that these scenarios involve threatening the PRC with nuclear devastation if it threatens a nuclear attack on Japan.

And I wonder what they were smoking in RAND-land, when it came to reassurance for Taiwan and Japan. This is worse than Trump selling Estonia down the river:

As for U.S. initiation of nuclear war with China, this seems even more far-fetched. ... More bluntly put, the Soviet threat to NATO was deemed existential, whereas the Chinese threat to U.S. allies and interests in East Asia is not. In line with this, current U.S. declaratory policy concerning use of nuclear weapons makes no allowance for first-use in the event of war with China, even were it going badly.

Basically, an invitation for Japan to go nuclear unless it wants to subject itself to getting pummeled by the PRC, and for Taiwan to turn to Japan for further security assurances.

So, affairs are somewhat more complicated than the simplistic “We’ll just slug it out Godzilla vs. Mothra style; no nukes!” assumptions of the RAND study. What we actually have is “The war will stay conventional because we will threaten a retaliatory nuclear attack on the PRC if it goes nuclear in theater.”

With the rather questionable corollary, “If we sustain the nuclear umbrella over Japan with a tactical nuclear counter-strike in theater, no way the PRC will launch a nuclear counter-strike on the United States.”

And U.S. wins the conventional war. The End.

But I think the logic of the confrontation dictates that the PRC demonstrate its determination to escalate what the US is trying to contain as a conventional exchange into a nuclear exchange, one that has the potential to inflict unacceptable costs on US allies and maybe even on the US homeland.

Per this game plan, the PRC would let the US know it plans to impute nuclear first strike to any US offensive operations against the PRC and that it will cut loose in a nuclear way “on warning” against Japan, the United States, heck, why not South Korea if the US Air Force, Space Command, Cyber Command whatever threaten to degrade mainland targets — even if the US is saying, “Hey, trust us, this is just a conventional attack and we’re not targeting your strategic deterrent.”

And it would mean that the PRC could no longer rely on its simple and limited ICBM strategic nuclear deterrent, and would have to consider going with more flexible and nastier nuclear capabilities, triggering a nuclear arms race in Asia.

I think that’s enough unthinkable analytic goodness to flesh out the report and earn me a RANDcube near the coffee machine.

But I do wonder what they’re drinking out of that coffee machine.

The best case scenario is that RAND knows a direct US-China war could plausibly blow up into a nuclear confrontation but is cynically carrying water for the Navy and Air Force in their desire to fund an epic conventional buildup around the PRC.

Next best case scenario in issuing the report publicly is a matter of signaling to the PRC, telling China the US has a roadmap for escalation that counters all of the PRC in theater scenarios, so better not start anything!

Not so great case is RAND has been charged with developing an extravagant conventional war scenario that takes tactical as well as strategic nukes off the table, in order to convince Japan it doesn’t have to become a declared nuclear power, thereby shredding the US nuclear-umbrella-based security architecture in Asia.

Worst case scenario is that RAND has drunk its own Kool-Aid and seriously believes that the PRC is so afraid of the consequences it’s not going to cross nuclear swords with the US under any scenario.

What worries me is that the “China will knuckle under in a US-PRC war” prediction pretty much recapitulates “China will knuckle under once it loses the UNCLOS case” prediction which is, you may have noticed, not doing very well.

The PRC has engaged in overt, across-the-globe statements and operations declaring that it is ready to accept a high level of tension with all of its key interlocutors, from Japan to South Korea to Australia to the EU and UK and the Philippines rather than take an “off ramp” and surrender its pretensions in the South China Sea.

Chinese intransigence seems to have surprised the analytic community, which may have compounded its confidence that the untested PRC military would back down with a mistaken and overly optimistic mis-reading of the precedent of the US refusal to accept an international law ruling in a case brought by Nicaragua in 1984.

The talking point that beguiles the national security commentariat in the US, Philippines, and Vietnam is that the US knuckled under and bought its way out of its Nicaraguan dilemma with a \$500 million payoff, so the PRC can think about doing the same. Unfortunately, this reading is, as I discussed previously at Asia Times and elsewhere, completely false.

And if think-tank land seriously thinks that the PRC will be seduced by the idea that it can buy its way out of its UNCLOS dead end with a bribe of a few billion dollars to the Philippines, they are—in my opinion, naturally—somewhat deluded.

The pivot has entered a stage in which the PRC has decided the risks of escalation are preferable to the costs of accommodation. And the period in which nuclear weapons could be realistically excluded from the East Asian strategic calculation is, I believe, sadly coming to an end.