

Caitlin Talmadge, "Assessing The Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security*, forthcoming 2017.

ABSTRACT: Could a conventional war with the United States inadvertently prompt Chinese nuclear escalation? This paper develops a general framework identifying both the military-technical and perceptual variables that could lead to this type of nuclear escalation, and applies the framework to assess the likelihood of Chinese first use in response to a U.S. conventional campaign to defend Taiwan. The analysis finds that Chinese nuclear escalation under these conditions is plausible, although not inevitable. Notably, the danger stems less from the purely military-technical threat that a U.S. conventional campaign would pose to China's nuclear arsenal, which is sometimes overstated, than from what China is likely to believe the campaign signals about broader U.S. intentions once a conventional war is underway. Together, these military-technical realities and perceptual dynamics could lead to reasonable Chinese fears that the United States might be attempting conventional counterforce, or considering or preparing for nuclear counterforce. Under these conditions China could see nuclear escalation for purposes of coercion or punishment as a viable response, notwithstanding the country's no-first-use policy and inability to limit damage by going first. These findings have important ramifications for U.S. policy and military strategy, and illustrate broader dilemmas that the United States may face in conventional wars with other nuclear-armed adversaries.