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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Elbridge Colby**

Episode 39: Conventional and Nuclear Weapons
in Future U.S. Security Strategy

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Zhao: You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China's foreign policy, international role, and China's relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center located in Beijing. I am Tong Zhao, an associate in Carnegie's Nuclear Policy Program based at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy in Beijing. I will be your host today.

I'm delighted to be joined by Elbridge Colby. Elbridge Colby is the Robert Gates fellow at the Center for New American Security, where he focuses on strategic deterrence, nuclear weapons, conventional force, intelligence, and related issues. In 2012, he worked for Mitt Romney's presidential campaign and served as the deputy Head for National Security Personnel. From 2010 to 2013, he was a principle analyst and a Division lead for Global Strategic Affairs at the Center for Naval Analyses. Before that, he served for over five years in the U.S. government, including as policy advisor to the Secretary of Defense Representative for the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, as an expert advisor to the Congressional Strategic Posture Commission, and as a staff member on the President's Commission on the Intelligent Capabilities of the U.S. Regarding WMDs, with the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, and with the State Department. Colby also serves or has served as a consultant to a variety of U.S. government entities on a range of defense and intelligence matters. In 2014, he served as a staff member of the National Defense Panel. Elbridge is a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School. He has co-edited a volume on *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretation* and has co-chaired a CSIS working group study on U.S.-China nuclear weapons issues entitled *Nuclear Weapons and U.S.-China Relations: A Way Forward*, and he has published book chapters in a number of edited collections. So, welcome Elbridge.

Colby: Thanks, Zhao. Great to be here.

Zhao: Yeah, it's a very impressive resume for a person as young as your age.

Colby: Definitely not. I always say that the longer your resume, the less impressive and important you are. So mine is certainly an illustration of that. It goes on for a while. I need to shorten it.

Zhao: Well, I'm very delighted to have you today...

Colby: Delighted to be here.

Zhao: ...and I'm looking forward to hearing your insight on a number of very important national security issues. Some of these actually significantly affect the U.S.-China relationship as a whole. So, I think one of the topics that is discussed a lot both in the United States and here in some quarters in China is about the so-called "offset strategy" that was just rolled out by the Department of Defense. But as we know, this is not actually the first offset strategy of the United States. There were two previous offset strategies. The first one was intended to offset the Soviet Union through nuclear weapons, and the second one was intended to offset potential adversaries through precedence strike. We know that former Secretary of Defense William Perry was usually credited with leading the second offset strategy in the late 1970s, and actually the incoming Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, has a very close relationship with William Perry. It's likely that he is going to embrace this new strategy, the third offset strategy. But first of all, how is the third offset

strategy different from the two previous ones? What's the uniqueness of this offset strategy, and more importantly and more, I think, interesting to our Chinese audiences—what role does China play in the formation of this third offset strategy?

Colby: Great, well thanks, Zhao. It's a really important topic, and thanks again for having me here. I think you're right to place the offset strategy in its historical context. A number of Pentagon leaders have pointed to historical precedents, in particular the first offset strategy which was President Eisenhower's "New Look," which was the idea to offset Soviet conventional superiority, particularly numerical superiority in Europe, with U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons. As China well knows, at the time the United States had a distinct advantage both qualitatively and quantitatively in its nuclear forces. The second offset strategy was once the Soviets had reached rough parity and some degree of strategic equivalence with the United States in the nuclear area. It was an attempt to try to offset Soviet conventional force superiority in Europe through exploitation of more advanced technologies and practices: micro processing better, integration of systems, computers, etc. So what they share is this offset. This may not be as obvious to the Chinese listeners, but an offset is basically the idea that you do something which kind of defeats the advantage that your opponent has over you in strategy. So, in some sense, any good strategy is an offset strategy. You seek to offset your opponent's advantages by exploiting or leveraging your own.

So, I think the Pentagon leadership has been very clear that this offset strategy should be seen as a continuation of that, but in some sense it goes back much, much farther. You know, I'm a big fan of this offset strategy. I think the way to think about this offset strategy is the United States sees itself, and much of the world has seen it as not always perfect, far from it, but a reasonably decent kind of security provider, a stabilizing force on the whole, and certainly on the whole a benevolent force. Part of that is, really elemental and foundational to that stabilizing role is that ability to project power, military power, credibly and effectively, particularly to extend deterrence and maintain stability in key regions, particularly Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

There's a growing concern among U.S. defense decision-makers that this U.S. ability is under challenge, particularly from, if you will, the diffusion of military technology to more and more states. So the way I would see offset is that it's an effort to extend the American ability to project credible power in the future. It's basically a status quo. It's a reform, but it's designed to maintain the status quo in U.S. position. I think, you know, to be frank, China plays an important role in this. Obviously, the United States and China are partners in a lot of ways, but there are also areas of disagreements. Speaking realistically, there is the potential for crisis and even conflict, God forbid. Obviously, something we all hope to avoid very much, but I think the view in the United States among those who support the offset strategy is "better to be safe than sorry." So, it's better to maintain U.S. power projections and capabilities, even in the face of Russia's military advances, other countries, but also China's. People have talked a lot about the anti-access, area denial challenge. You know, the United States wants to be able to project power credibly and effectively throughout maritime Asia, not to attack China or invade China, or something like that. That's the farthest thing, I think, from our minds; but to defend U.S. allies like Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, etc. So I think the offset strategy is an effort to try to continue to do that credibly and effectively and do it by taking advantage of the new sources of U.S. advantage and leverage, rather than those of the past.

Zhao: Very interesting. Actually, a lot is happening recently about American defense policy. You know, we have this offset strategy. We have this new national security strategy recently being released by the White House, and also something seems to be happening to the so-called air-sea battle. In January, I think, we got the news that the Pentagon's air-sea battle concept is being replaced and being absorbed into a broader, multi-service effort to develop so-called Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (or short as JAM-GC). So this sounds very long and not a very straightforward term, and you know, we Chinese, we have spent all of our attention and resources into studying air-sea battle. You know, tons of papers being written, books published, and, all of the sudden, those efforts become irrelevant. First of all, is this a strategy by the Americans to confuse us Chinese?

Colby: I don't know. That would be imbuing a lot of cleverness to the American strategic formulation, which I don't think is usually a good idea. But, I think that there's a bureaucratic reshuffling or a bureaucratic reorganization related to air-sea battle. Of course, it's important to emphasize that air-sea battle, in some sense, was always blown out of proportion would be the right word? I think air-sea battle was kind of a concept driver, an idea to streamline the military services to focus them on a set of problems rather than a kind of a dominant defense plan or something like that, or strategy. I do think there's less change here than meets the eye. I think that the basic realities [remain] that the United States is increasingly focused on meeting challenges to its power projection capability, its ability to operate in the global commons, but also to be able to take down potential adversaries' battle networks, in the lexicon of air-sea battle. I think, you know, there may be thinking about the best way to message that and the best way to talk about that, but I wouldn't read this as a fundamental change in U.S. defense policy strategy. I think this is still very focused on making sure that it can credibly project power and can do so even in the face of adversary opposition.

Zhao: Great, that's very reassuring. Our previous efforts on air-sea battle study, they will still maintain...

Colby: Not all wasted.

Zhao: Yeah. You have recently written broadly about the conventional military gap between the United States and China, and you have argued, I think, the conventional military gap between the two countries being closer. In certain confined military theatres, it is possible that China is even going to obtain a so-called conventional superiority. As a result, I think, you argue that the implication is that, for a regional conflict between China and the United States, it's more likely that this conventional conflict can go nuclear in the future. So, let's talk about the preconditions first because I'm not sure that the Chinese share the consensus that China is obtaining a conventional superiority over the United States. If we look at all of the most advanced, conventional military technologies, including missile defense, hypersonic, global strike systems, the United States is still far ahead of China in terms of technology development and deployment. So, why do you think that the conventional gap is closing?

Colby: Well, that's good, and I think the first point to say is that I haven't said, and I hope it doesn't come across this way, that the conventional gap has closed or that China has achieved conventional superiority. What I've said, I think, and which I do think is true, is that China is

making progress in shrinking the gap. Now, let's put this in historical perspective. Until the mid-1990s, China was a land power. It had a very massive army that was primarily focused on manpower, and primarily defense against the Soviet Union, and was not looking to exploit advanced technology. For a variety of reasons, starting in the 1990s China, obviously, embarked on a very ambitious effort which has now lasted for two decades to develop more of a capability to conduct warfare under highly informationalized conditions. Basically, as I understand Chinese military doctrine and Chinese military objectives, it's to be able to fight a war under very modern conditions, and that involves using the most advanced technology, both having the capabilities but also having the personnel who know how to operate them. I think in the last two decades China has made quite a lot of progress on that. They've reformed the PLA, which has gone quite far. Obviously, the PLA still has great major, major problems and roadblocks, but China has developed highly sophisticated systems and has developed them in quantity. I think what we can say now is that China is considerable more powerful in its near-abroad, particularly within an un-refueled aircraft range, within missile range of the Chinese coast, in particular.

Beyond that, I think China's military influence drops off pretty quickly. So, sort of out in the farther reaches of the Pacific or the Indo-Pacific, China's military influence I think right now is pretty, pretty slim and would not do well in a contest, but my impression is that the Chinese are working on that. Of course, even within the first island chain, I think China has some advantages but also still has some significant disadvantages. I think the point that I'm trying to make about this is more that the military balance is becoming more competitive and more even. So, you know, it's going to become more uncertain. So, there's areas in which China has significant advantages, for instance in areas near the Chinese coasts, the number of Chinese aircraft, the number of Chinese missiles poses significant, a very significant challenge.

Whereas in the past the United States could basically operate unfettered or unconcerned about Chinese power projection or military power within, in the western Pacific, that is now not the case anymore. I think, you know, I think the point is also that those trends are significant. China has continued to spend (and to) increase its defense budget by about ten percent per year, and that continued last year. If it remains true this year, it would be very suggestive, very, in some ways, disturbing, but that means the trend lines that China is going to continue to improve its military capabilities. Of course, the United States and U.S. allies but also a range of countries are taking note of this, and it's going to have a significant impact. I think the bottom line is that I don't at all think that China has a military advantage. I think China would be very unwise to try to, and I think nobody knows this better than the PLA, but I think China would be unwise to try to use this, its newfound military power, directly or in-avertedly, against the United States or its allies and partners. The reality nonetheless is that the gap between the United States and China has shrunk and probably will continue shrinking.

Zhao: Okay, and in that case, you argue that conventional war between the United States and China is more likely to go nuclear. In other words, the escalation risk to the nuclear level is much greater under the circumstances that you've just discussed. So why is that the case, and, more specifically, who is more likely to use nuclear weapons first in the future conventional conflict, China or the United States?

Colby: Right, and that's exactly right. I think there are two reasons why nuclear escalation becomes more likely. Well, the first reason is that in a more competitive, a more even military balance, a war becomes much more of a nasty, uncertain thing. So, in order to prevail, each side

will have to fight, in a sense, harder, dirtier, nastier, more quickly, with less deliberation, and so forth and so on, with less of an understanding of what's happening. If you're going to try to control escalation, right, ideally you will have the leisure, the luxury, of deciding very carefully and with a high degree of information what you're going to do so you don't hit the wrong target and you don't send the wrong signal. Well, in a more competitive military balance, that becomes more difficult. I mean, we know, for instance, that intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and communications will be much more difficult in an environment in which cyberspace is contested, in which space is contested, in which airborne assets will be under greater threat and therefore will have to be more protected.

So this brings up what has been called the inadvertent escalation problem, which is that, for instance, if China strikes certain U.S. or allied assets or vice versa if the United States strikes certain Chinese assets, that may be construed as an escalation, even in a way that the attacking party didn't intend. For instance, there are reports that China has dual-use facilities. You know, I think that it's reasonable to think that the United States would have to hit certain facilities, and it may not know whether those are dual use or not. This could send the wrong signal to China. So, this is one problem. The second issue is that China's nuclear force is becoming more sophisticated and at least somewhat larger. I respect and I believe that China has exhibited restraint in its nuclear posture, and I think many people, including me, would commend China for that restraint. I think it's not just goodwill; it's also in China's interest. But, this is going to make nuclear escalation more plausible on the Chinese side, and so this will also make nuclear escalation more significant, partially because the United States will have to reckon, will have to calculate that China may be more willing to escalate to the nuclear level.

Now, in terms of who would go first, I think that would really depend. I think in a situation in which—I mean, I think the basic answer is that the party that is more likely to go nuclear first is the party that's losing, right? So, for the near to medium term, I think China would be more likely to go first because the United States and its allies will still have the meaningful conventional advantage, but I think over the longer term that it's more possible that the United States could be the one to go first because, if China does obtain conventional superiority, the United States may look to rely more on its nuclear forces to extend deterrence and to provide deterrence for its territories and interests in the region. That's partially because U.S. allies can be expected to want the United States to rely more on nuclear weapons. I mean, we already see that countries like South Korea, Japan, Australia do want the United States to continue to have a credible nuclear deterrence. I think it's reasonable to expect that would intensify if China did visibly obtain conventional superiority in the western Pacific.

Zhao: Okay, so if I understand correctly, at least part of the reason that a future war is more likely to become nuclear is because of the problem of signaling, problem of miscommunication, misunderstanding of each other's intentions. So, if that's the case, would Chinese "no first use" policy—which China has long-term, unconditional no first use policy—would that help alleviate the problem, and, to go one step further, would a bilateral no first use agreement or a political commitment to mutual no first use be a potential solution that can partially alleviate that problem?

Colby: I don't think so because the United State... I think the position of many analysts in the United States and many within the government is that there is a respect for China's no first use policy but a skepticism. It's not about China in particular. Any no first use policy is looked at with skepticism because it's impossible to bind the decisions of leaders and capabilities that would be

there in the event. So China's no first use policy is constructive in the sense that it makes China's resort to nuclear weapons seem considerably less plausible. So that's very good, and that can help mitigate escalation pressures. But, I think a mutual no first use agreement would be a bad idea because the United States extends deterrence, and so agreeing to a no first use policy is not a good idea because the United States could lose a conventional superiority. If it adopted no first use policy and lost conventional superiority, the U.S. allies would feel very exposed, and rightfully so. China has traditionally, at least from time to time, acknowledged the stabilizing benefits of U.S. extended deterrence in terms of proliferation and maintain stability in the region. So I think a U.S. no first use policy would not necessarily be good for China, either. Of course, there are huge verification problems that I think are probably insurmountable. So I don't see that as a real solution.

Zhao: Well, it's great to hear your very sobering insight. Thank you very much Elbridge, again, for spending time with me today, and that's it for this edition of the Carnegie-Tsinghua, China in the World podcast. If you'd like to read or learn more about nuclear policy and the U.S.-China relationship, you can find more articles, events, and podcasts on our website at www.carnegietsinghua.org. I encourage you to visit and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.

Colby: Thanks very much.

Zhao: Thank you so much.