

A Conceptual Synthesis of China's Peaceful Policy, Tolerance, and the Logic of Non-Provocative Defence

¹Ir Dr Assoc Professor Samuel Kwok Piu LIP CEng, RPE, RCM, CPE, CBE, FCIBSE, FIMechE, FIE.Aust, FCABE, FHKICA, FCIPE, MHKIE, MHKICM, MIET, MIFireE, MAIB, MASHRAE.,

²Dr. Wing Cheung TANG MCGI, CMgr, FCMI, FIMA, CPMC, FIMC

¹Founder and Managing Director of Lordray Engineering Company Limited

²Adjunct Professor of Spectrum International University College, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual synthesis analyses the interplay between China's declared policy of peaceful development, the notion of strategic tolerance, and the pragmatic rationale of non-provocative defence. Utilising defensive realism, security dilemma theory, deterrence theory, and just war traditions, the analysis assesses a series of propositions derived from a practitioner-oriented defence document. The synthesis contends that China's stance (prioritizing non-intervention, mutual respect, and the prevention of nuclear escalation) does not exclude but rather necessitates credible, low-cost territorial defence mechanisms. Three fundamental assertions are integrated: firstly, that China's peaceful policy fulfils both normative and strategic roles in a multipolar context; secondly, that tolerance, when accurately interpreted, represents a calculated restraint aimed at averting catastrophic conflict rather than indicating weakness; thirdly, that essential, geographically tailored defence measures (including natural barriers, water obstacles, missile interception systems, and minimal submarine-based deterrence) can deter potential aggressors without instigating arms races. The analysis reveals substantial deficiencies: the lack of empirical validation, insufficient operational specifics concerning "low-cost" defence architectures, unresolved conflicts between tolerance and effective deterrence, and the scarcity of quantitative data. The synthesis concludes by delineating a research agenda for defensive realism amid escalating great-power competition.

Keywords: China peaceful policy, strategic tolerance, defensive realism, non-provocative defence, nuclear deterrence, territorial integrity, conflict prevention

INTRODUCTION

In modern discussions about international relations, China's stated commitment to "peaceful development" (Zubair, 2023) and "strategic tolerance" is one of the ideas that people disagree on the most. Western realist scholars frequently construe these phrases as rhetorical pretexts for expansionist aspirations, whereas Chinese official pronouncements underscore mutual respect, non-interference, and the prevention of great-power conflict (Colby, 2021). This conceptual synthesis does not accept either position without question. Instead, it poses a more focused, analytically manageable inquiry: What is the logical connection among a stated peaceful policy, an attitude of tolerance, and the essential need for effective national defence?

This paper presents a structured exposition of defensive logic. It starts by looking at China's peaceful policy to "put off the end of the world to come by nuclear missiles and bombs." Then it changes gears and says that every country needs to build up its defences to protect itself from possible aggressors (Kim, Ishiyama & Breuning, 2026) who might think about invading. The analysis supports inexpensive, location-specific defence strategies, including natural barriers, fortifications, water obstacles, underwater explosives in shallow seas, and ultimately missile interception and a solitary submarine-based nuclear deterrent.

The authors do not support or defend every assertion in the source document analyses. Instead, this synthesis uses the tools of strategic studies, defensive realism, and peace research to pull out, formalise, and judge the logical structure of its argument. The synthesis goes like this. Section 2 looks at the most important theoretical frameworks. Section 3 looks at China's peaceful policy as a strategic doctrine. Section 4 breaks down what "tolerance" means in international relations. Section 5 looks at the proposed defensive logic. Section 6 looks at how possible and limited low-cost, terrain-based defence is. Section 7 talks about the nuclear deterrence minimalism that the document suggests. Section 8 points out important gaps and questions that haven't been answered. Section 9 presents conclusions and a research agenda.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Defensive Realism

Defensive realism (Juneau, 2020) posits that the international system is anarchic, states prioritise security over the maximisation of power, and aggressive expansion frequently proves counterproductive as it incites balancing coalitions. Defensive realists contend that conquest is challenging, offensive advantages are infrequent, and states can attain security through moderate, non-threatening military stances. This framework directly influences the source document's focus on "defence" instead of "offence," as well as its premise that a nation can ensure its safety without posing a threat to others.

Nevertheless, as Tabak (2025) notes, numerous policymakers do not explicitly engage with defensive realism. The source document does not present evidence indicating that defensive measures are less provocative than offensive ones, nor does it address counterarguments suggesting that even defensive preparations may be misinterpreted.

The Security Dilemma

The security dilemma (Hagstrom & Bremberg, 2022) posits that measures implemented by one state to enhance its own security frequently diminish the security of others, resulting in arms races and the potential for conflict. The source document's idea of "basic defense" (walls, culverts, underwater explosives, and intercept missiles) is meant to be non-threatening. But even defensive actions can be misunderstood. The author seems to know about this risk and is in favour of small, geographically limited defences instead of power-projection capabilities.

There is still a big hole: the source document doesn't say anything about how an enemy might see the proposed defences. The authors of this synthesis ask, "Would a wall be seen as defensive or as preparation for offensive operations?" This question is not easy to answer.

Deterrence Theory

Deterrence theory (Kuo, Talley & Huang, 2020) differentiates between deterrence through punishment (imposing the threat of unacceptable retaliation) and deterrence through denial (rendering aggression physically unfeasible or excessively expensive). Walls, culverts, and shallow-water explosives are examples of deterrence by denial (Colby, 2021), while intercepting missiles and nuclear weapons launched from submarines are examples of deterrence by punishment.

Stein's (2023) research on the "threat that leaves something to chance" is pertinent in this context. One nuclear-capable submarine can make things uncertain enough to stop rational aggressors. The source document's dependence on this reasoning ignores decades of criticism and improvement of deterrence theory.

Just War Theory

The just war tradition says that war is only okay if it's for self-defence and peaceful options have failed. China's official "peaceful policy" is often described like this: peaceful intentions don't mean that you can't respond with force to an invasion. The assertion in the source document that "prevention is better than cure" resonates with the just war principle (Buzar, 2020) of last resort—defensive preparations are not an initial offensive but a prerequisite for circumventing war entirely.

However, the source document does not address the conditions for legitimate self-defence outlined in just war theory (O'Driscoll et al., 2021), namely proportionality, necessity, and discrimination. It supports defence but does not say what would be a legitimate use of force.

CHINA'S PEACEFUL POLICY

Official Formulations

Since the 1980s, China has consistently talked about its policy of "peaceful development." According to the 2019 white paper "China's National Defence in the New Era" which was published by the State Council Information Office, "China pursues a national defence policy that is defensive in nature." China's growth does not endanger any nation. China will never try to become the most powerful country or expand, no matter how much it grows.

Some people have thought that China's actions, like militarising the South China Sea and having border problems with India, are not consistent with a purely defensive stance. Paszak (2020) says that this tension is still an open question in official Chinese defence discourse.

Strategic Functions of the Peaceful Policy Discourse

Researchers have discerned various functions of China's peaceful policy rhetoric (Lai, 2019). First, to reassure neighbours: China's peaceful claims are meant to keep balancing coalitions from forming, especially in Southeast and East Asia, where memories of Japanese and Western imperialism are still strong. Second, legitimation within the global order: China sees itself as a status-quo power rather than a revisionist one by supporting the principles of the UN Charter and non-intervention. Third, stabilisation at home: a peaceful outside world lets the Communist Party focus on economic growth and running the country. Fourth, strategic ambiguity: the same conversation can include coercive actions by framing them as defensive responses to other people's provocations.

Peaceful Policy as a Constraint on Defence Posture

China's defensive doctrine is very important because it not only limits its own military structure (it doesn't have bases overseas like the US does and it has a no-first-use nuclear policy), but it also affects how it advises other countries. This doctrine fits with the source document's focus on "basic defence" and "prevention" instead of offensive power projection. But the document's support for "intercontinental nuclear missiles" on submarines doesn't sit well with China's official pledge not to use nuclear weapons first. This doesn't mean that submarines can't be used for second-strike deterrence.

There is still a big hole: the source document doesn't say how a single submarine would fit into a no-first-use policy. Would the submarine only launch if there was a nuclear attack? Or would it be allowed to launch if there was a regular invasion? The document doesn't say anything about this difference.

Empirical Evidence of Policy Effectiveness

It does not substantiate that China's peaceful policy has effectively diminished conflict, deterred aggression, or enhanced security. A thorough examination necessitates historical case studies (specifically, China's management of border conflicts with India, Vietnam, or Russia) comparative data on militarised interstate disputes, and survey evidence reflecting threat perceptions among China's neighbouring countries. The authors of this synthesis regard this absence as a substantial gap, rather than as proof that such evidence is nonexistent.

TOLERANCE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Defining Tolerance

According to Prepotenska et al. (2022), tolerance is mentioned in the source document to support peaceful policy. Being tolerant means, both having an attitude of being patient with provocation up to a point and taking a strategic stance of not overreacting. In political theory, tolerance encompasses: an objection to certain behaviours

or beliefs; the authority to intervene or impose penalties; and a conscious decision to refrain from exercising that authority.

In international relations, strategic tolerance means that a strong state chooses not to retaliate against small provocations, even if it means paying a price, to keep the peace and stop things from getting worse. This framework asserts that not every transgression requires a proportional retaliatory response; instead, the prevailing state intentionally permits minor acts of aggression, such as border incursions, trade violations, or rhetorical challenges, primarily to preserve regional stability and strengthen enduring alliances, thereby preventing the emergence of a wider retaliatory cycle.

Strategic tolerance thus serves as a finely tuned tool for managing risk, projecting a stance of restraint while not showing weakness. This strategy makes it easier to look for diplomatic solutions while still allowing the state to act quickly if its most important interests are clearly threatened.

When Tolerance Becomes Weakness

People may mistake tolerance for weakness, which can lead to aggression. This is a well-known problem in the theory of deterrence. The source document suggests that the best way to solve the problem is to combine tolerance with strong, visible defence capabilities. The state is patient, but it is not defenceless. Walls, guns, missiles, and submarines show this. This combination of tolerance in diplomacy and readiness in defence is meant to solve the credibility paradox.

Implicit Model

The implicit model can be structured as follows:

- If a state is both tolerant (doesn't respond to low-level provocations) and credibly defended (can impose high costs on any invader), then potential aggressors will be discouraged.
- If the state is open-minded but not protected, aggression is likely to happen.
- If the state is intolerant but well-protected, arms races and preemptive strikes are likely to happen.

The authors of this synthesis assert that this model is plausible yet unverified. It also assumes that actors are rational and work together, which isn't true for non-state actors, leaders who aren't rational, or states that have political reasons to create conflicts with other countries.

THE DEFENSIVE LOGIC OF THE SOURCE DOCUMENT

Core Argument Reconstruction

People can put together the argument in the source document as a series of premises and a conclusion:

Premise 1: Some national leaders, known as "mad dictators", are willing to invade other countries even if it means killing everyone on Earth.

Premise 2: Countries that are weak or rich are especially likely to be taken over.

Premise 3: China's peaceful policy and tolerance show that it is possible to seek security without being aggressive.

Premise 4: Every country can and should build up its defences in a way that is cheap, fits geography, does not provoke, and is strong enough to stop or defeat an invasion.

Premise 5: Prevention (putting money into defence before a threat appears) is better than cure (responding after an invasion).

Conclusion: To protect their sovereignty without starting a global disaster, all countries should have basic, terrain-based defence systems. If possible, they should also have interceptive missiles and one submarine-based nuclear deterrent.

Evaluation of Premises

Premise 1 is empirically disputed. There have been aggressive leaders in the past, like Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo, and Saddam Hussein. However, the idea that these leaders would risk "end to all human lives on earth" is based on the idea that nuclear escalation would happen, which has been avoided in the past even when it was very close (the Cuban Missile Crisis is a good example). The source document does not substantiate this premise.

It is true that weak and rich countries (like Kuwait in 1990) have been annexed. But "weak" is not clear, does it mean military weakness, economic weakness, or political weakness? The paper does not say.

Premise 3 is not an argument; it is an assertion. One's interpretation of Chinese actions in the South China Sea, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and along the Indian border will determine if China's policy shows this possibility. The source document does not address opposing evidence.

The most developed claim in the document is Premise 4, which is looked at in Section 6.

Premise 5 is a common saying in risk management, but it's not always true: if the chance of an invasion is very low, it might be more expensive to stop it than to fix it. The document presumes that invasion is probable enough to warrant investment yet fails to present evidence supporting that probability.

LOW-COST, TERRAIN-BASED DEFENCE

Natural Barriers

The source document says to investigate a country's borders for natural defences, like high cliffs or shallow water that carriers and warships can't get to. Natural barriers have always been good at making forces stronger. The mountains in Switzerland, the English Channel, and the jungles in Vietnam all made it harder to invade. But natural barriers aren't always the same, technology changes. Smaller, shallow-draft ships or amphibious vehicles may now be able to get through shallow water that is used to block warships. An airborne assault can get around high cliffs. The source document does not talk about technology becoming obsolete.

Fortifications

The source document says that you should build high walls like the Great Wall of China and put soldiers and cannons on guard. In the past, the Great Wall did not stop many invasions, such as those by the Mongols and Manchus. It made raids less common and less serious, but it wasn't completely safe. Modern walls, like the Israeli West Bank barrier or the Hungarian border fence, can keep people and cars from moving, but they can be broken down by artillery, tunnelling, or just going around.

Most countries could technically build a high wall with armed guards. A wall along a long border, like the one between the United States and Mexico or the one between Russia and Ukraine, would be very expensive, costing hundreds of millions to billions of dollars. For countries with long borders, this is a big financial commitment.

Water Obstacles

The source document suggests digging deep water culverts in front of high walls, saying that tanks and soldiers can't cross. Water obstacles and anti-tank ditches are common in military engineering. They can work if they are kept up and protected by fire. But modern engineering vehicles, like bridge layers and excavators, can cross or

fill in these kinds of gaps with help from fire. The source document presupposes a static, low-technology opponent—an assumption that may prove inaccurate.

Underwater Explosives in Shallow Seas

The source document suggests putting underwater bombs into shallow seas to keep boats from landing on land. Underwater mines (Xie, Yang & Gong, 2020) are a well-known way to protect yourself. They are cheap, can be put in place during peacetime, and can keep landing craft, amphibious vehicles, and submarines from getting to them. But mines are also dangerous for fishing and shipping by civilians. They need to be mapped out very carefully so that they don't hurt neutral ships. Mine-clearing technology, such as mine-sweeping ships, underwater drones, and magnetic and acoustic countermeasures, can also clear minefields over time. The source document does not talk about countermining.

Integrated Defence in Depth

A serious military analysis would say that one obstacle is not enough. The source document suggests a defense-in-depth system that protects in the following order: natural barriers, wall, water obstacle, underwater mines, armed guards, intercept missiles, and nuclear deterrent. This layered setup is smart from a strategic point of view. But it's important to be clear about how these different layers will work together when they are attacked at the same time. It also needs plans for what to do if a layer fails and for strengthening weak areas. If there are no clear rules for communication between layers and activation thresholds, protection gaps can form. This could give enemies the chance to take advantage of the gaps between different defensive measures.

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE MINIMALISM

The Single-Submarine Proposition

One ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) has enough nuclear warheads to destroy many cities. If the submarine is undetectable, which is a big technological challenge, an enemy can't be sure that their first strike will destroy it. So, the enemy doesn't want to attack because even a successful conventional invasion could lead to nuclear retaliation.

The writers of this synthesis point out several weaknesses in this idea. Improvements in anti-submarine warfare, such as sonar networks, underwater drones, and satellite-based magnetic anomaly detection, make stealth less useful. One submarine can't be on patrol all year because it needs to be repaired, trained, and refuelled, which makes it vulnerable. To get launch orders, you need secure communications that can't be jammed, which can happen. If the submarine's commander can't get in touch with national command authorities, they might have to choose between if war has started and doing nothing. For nuclear deterrence to be effective, the opponent must be convinced that the submarine commander will initiate a launch following a conventional invasion. If the invasion doesn't directly threaten the submarine, this credibility is in doubt.

Comparison with Minimal Deterrence Postures

A few countries have either adopted or thought about minimal nuclear deterrence. France's force de frappe (Connor, 2025) has a small number of nuclear weapons, but they can be delivered by air, land, or sea. China's no-first-use policy and minimal deterrent are thought to be less than 500 warheads, which is a small amount compared to the arsenals of the US or Russia. North Korea and other potential proliferators have sought nuclear weapons in part for regime preservation, operating under the rationale that a limited arsenal can dissuade invasion.

The authors of this synthesis note that "one submarine would only be enough if a country's nuclear strategy was just about hitting back at a small, specific threat, not a major power." But no nuclear power really does this. A state must have complete confidence in its ability to retaliate effectively, even if there is a first strike, equipment failure, or multiple threats at the same time. One submarine is a single point of failure. If an accident happens,

the submarine is found, or it needs repairs, that country would be completely defenceless. To make sure that they can patrol all the time, stay alive, and send credible deterrence signals, major nuclear powers keep several submarines.

The Risk of Pre-emptive Attack

A well-known problem with minimal deterrence is that it might lead to preemptive attacks. If an enemy thinks it can destroy the only submarine in a surprise first strike, it might do so during a crisis. The source document assumes that the submarine can never be found, but this is a brave assumption. A more realistic evaluation would recognise that a singular, designated submarine patrol zone could be inundated with anti-submarine warfare resources in times of crisis.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

The source document views nuclear weapons as a technical solution, neglecting their devastating humanitarian impacts. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons are two examples of international law that say nuclear weapons are too dangerous to use. The source document does not address these frameworks. The authors of this synthesis say that this is a big gap in ethics and the law.

CRITICAL GAPS AND UNADDRESSED QUESTIONS

The source document has some major problems that make it less useful for research, in addition to the gaps found in individual sections.

(a) Lack of empirical evidence -- The study does not reference any cases, data, historical examples, or statistical analyses. It claims connections without proof. A minimum scholarly standard would necessitate case studies of nations that have effectively employed terrain-based defence, such as Finland against the USSR in 1939–40, Switzerland, and Vietnam, as well as nations that have failed despite such defences, exemplified by France's Maginot Line.

(b) No response to counterarguments -- The study asserts its proposals as evidently accurate. It does not take objections into account: What if the enemy uses planes to get around walls? What if they use precise weapons to blow up the culvert? What if they get into Special Forces before the invasion? What if they use cyberattacks to turn off missile interception systems? What if someone finds the submarine and sinks it? These aren't small issues; they are very important for deciding if the proposal is possible.

(c) The idea that technology does not change -- The study implicitly posits that defence technologies retain their efficacy indefinitely. Competition between offence and defence is always changing. Walls and culverts that stop tanks today may not work against drones and self-driving cars tomorrow.

(d) No political or diplomatic aspect -- The research regards defence as exclusively technical and national. It doesn't consider alliances, international law, economic sanctions, diplomacy, or ways to settle conflicts. A country that builds walls and mines its waters may be safer from attack, but it may also lose trade, investment, and diplomatic ties.

(e) The idea that the dictator is crazy -- The study's security threat is embodied as a "mad dictator" prepared to jeopardise nuclear destruction. This framing is not useful for analysis. Most interstate wars are not caused by insanity, but by errors in judgement, problems with commitment, unequal access to information, and political incentives at home.

(f) No talk about how the arms race works -- The study supports intercept missiles and nuclear submarines without contemplating potential adversary responses. If Country A puts up missile defences (Godwin, 2022), Country B might make more missiles or come up with ways to get through them. The document proposes defence as a unilateral remedy, disregarding the strategic interplay that characterises international security.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH AGENDA

Summary of Findings

This conceptual synthesis has analysed and assessed the logical framework of a non-academic document promoting low-cost, terrain-based defence, intercept missiles, and limited nuclear deterrence, contextualised by support for China's peaceful policy and strategic tolerance. The analysis produces five conclusions.

First, the assertion that peaceful policy and credible defence are compatible is theoretically plausible yet empirically unverified in the source document.

Second, the problem of tolerance-weakness is real, but the document's proposed solution (visible defense) is only partial; it doesn't deal with misperception, irrationality, or domestic reasons for aggression.

Third, low-cost, terrain-based defence has historical precedents but is neither as cheap nor as universally effective as the document implies; quantitative feasibility studies are absent.

Fourth, the idea of single-submarine nuclear deterrence is very controversial and needs a lot more thought about the risks of being detected, the reasons for preemption, the reliability of command, and the moral implications.

Fifth, the document's main purpose is to make people think more deeply about defensive realism, not to be used as a defence plan.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following research directions are suggested based on the gaps found.

(a) Empirical validation of defensive realism -- Researchers ought to examine whether investment in non-provocative, terrain-based defence diminishes the probability of being attacked, while controlling power, alliances, and regime type. Longitudinal, cross-national quantitative studies would be especially beneficial.

(b) Analysis of cost-effectiveness -- A comparative analysis should assess the marginal deterrent effect of expenditures on walls, culverts, and underwater mines relative to alternative investments, including diplomacy, economic development, or conventional mobile forces. Middle powers, including Vietnam, Poland, and Egypt, could function as case studies.

(c) The trustworthiness of minimal nuclear deterrence -- An experimental or survey-based study should ascertain the conditions under which a potential aggressor would perceive that a defender possessing a solitary ballistic missile submarine would initiate nuclear retaliation following a conventional invasion.

(d) China's peaceful policy as an example -- A thorough assessment is necessary to ascertain whether China's defensive doctrine and no-first-use commitment have alleviated concerns among neighbouring countries, or if alternative factors, such as U.S. alliances, economic interdependence, and domestic politics, have played a more significant role.

(e) Levels of tolerance -- We need to understand better how states can credibly communicate their limits of tolerance without making things worse, as well as what diplomatic and military signs show the difference between strategic tolerance and weakness.

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