

China's Growing Nuclear Threat

THE ISSUE

China, the pace threat for the United States, is rapidly growing and diversifying its nuclear arsenal, expanding in recent years from a land-based monad to near completion of a viable strategic nuclear triad.

According to the Director of National Intelligence (DNI):

China is building a larger and increasingly capable nuclear missile force that is more survivable, more diverse, and on higher alert than in the past, including nuclear missile systems designed to manage regional escalation and ensure an intercontinental second-strike capability.

The Chinese lack of transparency, and lack of interest in nuclear arms control discussions and negotiations, should cause deep concern about the evolution of Beijing's nuclear arsenal, including its nuclear policy.

Developments in China's nuclear force structure and doctrine deserve U.S. attention—and action.

AN ACTIVE ATOMIC ARSENAL

According to the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, Admiral Charles Richard, China is doubling—if not tripling or quadrupling—its current stockpile of about 200 to 300 nuclear weapons within the next decade. But more important than warhead count is China's ability to produce more fissile material (such as with fast-breeder nuclear reactors) that will “change the upper bounds of what China could choose to do,” as stated by Admiral Richard. In contrast, the U.S. has not had the ability to produce nuclear weapons since the Cold War.

China's People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) deploys a wide range of

land-based nuclear systems. The force includes over 100 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), a number that is rapidly growing. China's ICBM arsenal consists of the silo-based DF-4 and DF-5 and the road-mobile and rail-mobile DF-31 and the newer DF-41, which can reportedly carry 10 warheads and strike the U.S. homeland from anywhere in China.

The PLARF also deploys multiple types of short-range, medium-range, and intermediate-range missiles that can carry conventional or nuclear warheads and strike targets with precision. For instance, the intermediate-range DF-26 can strike targets as far away as Guam, and the medium-range DF-17 missile might carry a dual-capable hypersonic missile to promptly strike targets within its reach, including U.S. regional bases. All regional missiles are road-mobile or rail-mobile, which presents a targeting challenge for American planners.

At sea, China deploys four Type 094 Jin-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). These SSBNs are believed to be equipped with up to 12 JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Beijing is also developing the much more capable Type 096 SSBN and the JL-3 SLBM, which can target the U.S. homeland from Chinese littoral waters.

China is completing its strategic nuclear triad with the updated, air-refuellable H-6N bomber that can carry a nuclear-capable air-launched ballistic missile. Its H-6K bomber can carry a nuclear-capable cruise missile. There have also been reports that China is developing a new, long-range strategic bomber, the H-20, which would be China's first new strategic bomber design in decades—and could bring Guam and Hawaii into range.

AN EVOLVING NUCLEAR DOCTRINE?

China's rapidly growing arsenal suggests that China is shifting away from a minimum deterrence posture, according to the Defense Department's [China Military Report](#). This means that China can execute "any plausible nuclear employment strategy regionally," and increasingly intercontinentally, [according to Admiral Richard](#). China's advanced forces also no longer constrain China to its already [questionable](#) No First Use policy. Additionally, evidence indicates that China moved a portion of its forces from a peacetime status to a launch-on-warning (LOW) posture, which it supports through improved spaced-based early warning capabilities, as [reported](#) by Admiral Richard.

These shifts in posture are particularly concerning given China's refusal to discuss these changes, especially its intentions. An unwillingness to engage on these issues—especially considering the early development of

China's strategic triad—raises the chances of misperception and mistakes. For instance, a LOW posture that keeps forces on high alert and compresses decision-making time without a clear communication of intentions could increase the chances of miscalculation. China's nuclear buildup under a veil of secrecy presents a clear threat to strategic stability.

CONCLUSION

Beijing is clearly revealing its grand ambitions through its unprecedented nuclear modernization programs, inserting more uncertainty and risk into an already challenging international security environment. These forces will enable China to improve its ability to coerce the U.S. and restrain response options. As a result, the United States must carefully consider the growing Chinese threat as it pursues its own [nuclear modernization](#) to ensure that U.S. nuclear deterrence remains strong.