

China's South Pacific Missile Test: Strategic Signaling and Regional Consequences

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

China's July 2026 missile test demonstrated increasing progress toward a credible sea-based nuclear deterrent and survivable second-strike capability.

The launch was likely intended to signal China's ability to threaten the U.S. homeland and allies, potentially weakening confidence in U.S. deterrence commitments.

The test created concern across the Pacific Islands, giving the U.S. and its allies a chance to reinforce their position as the region's preferred security partners.

On July 6, 2026, the People's Republic of China (PRC) tested an unarmed, nuclear-capable, intercontinental-range submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) that landed in the South Pacific.¹ This marked the first time the PRC tested its submarine-launched ballistic missile from a submarine, a notable and significant development in China's operationalization of second-strike and long-range strategic capabilities.² This *Issue Brief* provides background and analysis of China's test launch and its implications, with an emphasis on U.S. alliance management and the Pacific Islands.

Background

For most of its history, China maintained a minimal nuclear deterrent of 150 or so strategic nuclear

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weapons sitting atop a small number of intercontinental ballistic missiles.³ These systems represented a fraction of the American and Soviet arsenals and were not considered survivable in the event of adversary strikes.

This changed in 2021, when open sources reported that China had built hundreds of missile silos in its western desert. The U.S. Department of Defense later reported that China had embarked upon a “breathtaking” nuclear expansion and was the fastest-growing nuclear power on the planet.⁴ Most of these weapons were deployed on ground-based theater or intercontinental missiles and conveyed that China was seeking a far more robust nuclear posture that could hold targets at risk within the American homeland.⁵

On July 6 of this year, the PRC conducted an SLBM launch. The launch came from a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) in the South China Sea. The missile flew roughly 4,500 miles across the Pacific carrying a dummy simulation warhead and impacted in the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone between Nauru and Tuvalu.

The missile was launched by a Type 094 *Jin*-class SSBN, one of six Chinese nuclear ballistic missile submarines, each one of which can carry 12 ballistic missiles.⁶ The missile itself was likely a modern, intercontinental-range SLBM, the JL-3, though others have claimed that it was a JL-2.⁷ Beijing described the launch as being part of a routine annual training that was not aimed at any specific country.⁸ Some countries have publicly confirmed that they received advance notice—though only a few hours in advance.⁹

This was China’s first publicly acknowledged intercontinental-range SLBM test into the open Pacific and its first test into international waters.¹⁰ The test demonstrated that the Chinese navy could conduct a submerged launch with a missile capable of flying thousands of miles, thereby suggesting that China is enhancing its sea-based nuclear deterrent and is likely on its way to a credible, survivable, second-strike capability. Put another way, China is building a capability that can ultimately strike any target in the Western Hemisphere with a nuclear weapon with little to no strategic warning, even if its land-based strategic weapons (including those in ICBM silos) are destroyed in a conflict.

Analysis: Implications

China’s test launch carries both security and political implications for the United States and the Pacific region. These implications include:

The United States Was Likely the Primary Target of China’s Strategic Messaging. A core political message of the launch was to demonstrate

China's growing ability to employ the sea-based leg of its nuclear triad against the U.S. homeland from a relatively secure second-strike platform. The United States is the probable target because there are no other countries with which China could conceivably engage in strategic missile exchanges at intercontinental ranges. The United States is the only country with which China is plausibly preparing for a sustained peer-level military conflict that could involve large-scale nuclear and conventional missile exchanges in the near future. Further, a submarine-based secure second-strike capability suggests that China is trying to convince the United States that Washington cannot disarm Beijing of its nuclear arsenal in a "damage limitation" strike against its nuclear-ICBM forces without risking a retaliatory strike by China's nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines. Additionally, it is currently unknown if China notified the United States in advance of the strike.

The United States' Closest Pacific Treaty Allies—Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines—Were Likely the Secondary Targets of China's Messaging. The distance of the missile test represents China's capabilities that can hit targets not only inside the first island chain, including Japan and South Korea, but beyond the Second Island Chain and to Australia. The ability for China to strike U.S. allies as well as the American homeland from a survivable platform is meant to help decouple or "drive a wedge" between the United States and its closest treaty allies in the Pacific. First, it is meant to send the signal to Tokyo, Seoul, Canberra, and Manila that if they join a U.S.-led coalition against the PRC, they could make themselves the targets of retaliatory—possibly nuclear—strikes. This is meant to give pause to those states from joining such a coalition before the first shots are fired. Second, a Chinese survivable second-strike capability is meant to undermine the credibility of America's extended deterrent or nuclear umbrella over Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia by making those countries reiterate the question that Charles de Gaulle posed to John Kennedy: Would the United States be willing to trade New York for Paris—or, in the 21st century, Seoul for Seattle or Tokyo for San Francisco? In other words, do America's Indo-Pacific allies *really* believe that Washington would go to *nuclear war* to defend them if China can strike the American homeland with nuclear weapons?

Japan Is the Linchpin of U.S. Military Power in the Pacific. The United States uses Japanese bases to flow forces into theater, maintains an extensive network of bases within the Japanese home islands, and relies on command-and-control networks in Japan.¹¹ In any fight with China, Japanese partnership would likely be indispensable for U.S. military operations. For China, decoupling Japan from the United States is a paramount

concern—meaning that the ballistic missile launch may be as much of a warning shot to Japan as it was to the United States.

South Korea Is Also Important for Regional Stability in Northeast Asia. It has enjoyed a defense relationship with the United States since 1953 and would be integral—either directly or indirectly—in any large-scale conflict that unfolds in the Western Pacific. At the same time, South Korea has a history of needing reassurance about the efficacy of the United States’ extended deterrence guarantee.¹² The ballistic missile test in this sense could prompt policymakers and elected officials in Seoul to raise additional questions about whether the United States would use nuclear weapons in the defense of Korea if China has an assured second-strike capability that can reach the U.S. homeland.

Australia Has Been a Particular Target of Chinese Pressure Campaigns. Within the past year, Australia has established new security alliances with Papua New Guinea and, most recently, Fiji.¹³ It has also signed new security and economic treaties with Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Nauru.¹⁴ It is actively working to establish a similar treaty with the Solomon Islands and Tonga.¹⁵ Combined, Australia has spent considerable time and resources to enhance Pacific security and root out security threats posed by Chinese influence and access within the region. Therefore, a potential message that China is sending with this test is signaling to Australia that China can both strike mainland Australia as well as Australian assets that may be operating throughout the South Pacific. One possible Chinese objective, then, is to deter Australian efforts to strengthen security cooperation across the Pacific and raise the Pacific Islands’ perceived cost of aligning with Canberra.

The Philippines Has Been Positioning Itself as a Key U.S. Ally in Asia. Defense cooperation continues to expand across missile systems and basing access, with many of these developments in the face of relentless Chinese interference in sovereign Filipino territories in the South China Sea.¹⁶ Most recently, this July, a Chinese coast guard sailor “clubbed” a Filipino sailor at Ayungin Shoal, with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirming that a U.S. Coast Guard vessel came to “stand between the two sides” and “allowed the individual who was injured to be rescued and brought back for medical treatment.”¹⁷ Although this type of U.S. response is important for reassuring Manila of the United States’ commitment to its defense obligations, an assured second-strike capability during protracted conflict could raise questions about long-term reliance on the United States.

The Pacific Islands Were Likely the Third Target for Political Messaging. China may be signaling to the Pacific Islands that it is not in their

interest to deepen security cooperation, or even enter into an alliance, with Australia because it could risk involving them in a broader conflict. China has been seeking to dissuade Pacific Island countries from entering into security agreements with the United States or its allies that could restrict China's access to the islands and its ability to operate around the Pacific. While China continues to seek or maintain economic access and influence across the Pacific, the test may have functioned as a visible demonstration of Chinese military reach that can remind Pacific leaders of the costs they could incur if regional competition intensifies.

Possible Relationship Between China's Missile Test and Signing of Fiji–Australia Ocean of Peace Alliance, But Alliance Signing Likely Did Not Cause Test Itself. The missile landed approximately 750 miles northeast of the Solomon Islands in waters close to Tuvalu, which maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan.¹⁸ It is true that the timing of the launch is notable, given its occurrence just hours after Australia and Fiji signed their treaties. However, the planning of a missile test of this nature can take months to more than a year. It is therefore highly unlikely that the launch was *caused* by the treaty signing, but China may have deliberately selected a launch window that followed the signing once the broader test schedule had already been established.

China's Missile Test Generated Significant Concern Across the Pacific Islands. A significant number of Pacific Islands Forum members have released public statements that criticize China's missile test, though they have ranged in sharpness and expanded their concerns about testing beyond China. Countries that released statements expressing direct or indirect levels of criticism or concern include the Solomon Islands,¹⁹ Papua New Guinea,²⁰ Tuvalu,²¹ Vanuatu,²² Palau,²³ Samoa,²⁴ the Marshall Islands,²⁵ Tonga,²⁶ the Cook Islands,²⁷ and Fiji.²⁸ Nauru, Kiribati, Niue, Tokelau, the French territories, and the Federated States of Micronesia, which has a Compact of Free Association agreement with the United States, have not released any public statements. Many Pacific Island countries included references to the Treaty of Rarotonga,²⁹ which created a nuclear-weapon-free zone across the South Pacific after entering into force in 1986. China ratified Protocols 2 and 3 of the treaty in 1988.³⁰ Although China did not legally violate the treaty, Pacific leaders have invoked the “spirit and intent” of the treaty because the missile was nuclear-capable and landed in the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone.³¹

China also only notified countries “mere hours” in advance, which is far below the typical standards of diplomatic notifications of tests, with usually multiple months, if not longer, of advance notice.³² While China's

missile test generated significant concern across the Pacific Islands, some governments chose to balance their criticisms with expressing gratitude for their broader relationship with China while also calling on all countries, not just China, to cease missile testing. Notably, the Pacific Islands Forum has yet to issue a joint statement on the missile test despite Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stating that the Forum was drafting a “very strong” statement criticizing the test, suggesting that the Forum is not currently aligned on how, or if, to respond.³³ Still, the test can offer the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, among others, an opportunity to pitch themselves to Pacific Island countries as the preferred security partners of choice that uphold regional and international standards and are committed to a more stable, secure Pacific Ocean.

The U.S. Conducts Its Missile Tests in a Significantly Different Way than China. Although multiple Pacific Island governments used the occasion of China’s test launch to call on all military powers, including the United States, to refrain from missile testing in the Pacific, the United States conducts tests pursuant to long-standing agreements with sovereign Pacific governments. Under the Compacts of Free Association, the United States has exclusive military rights and authorities in the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau, including the ability to conduct military activities and maintain military facilities.³⁴ In particular, the United States conducts missile tests that land at the Ronald Reagan Space and Missile Test Range, located at U.S. Army Garrison-Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands.³⁵ As a result, U.S. missile tests are distinct because they are conducted through a bilateral agreement reached with a sovereign Pacific state—unlike Chinese missile tests that splashdown in South Pacific waters. Furthermore, the United States conducts missile testing through long-established coordination at a dedicated missile-testing facility in the Marshall Islands and uses established notification mechanisms with regional governments.³⁶ Notably, unlike with China’s July missile test, Pacific Island countries did not issue statements of concern when the United States conducted a missile test in 2025.³⁷ Therefore, Pacific Island concerns about missile tests are not solely due to the launch itself but also due to the manner, location, process, and transparency related to a launch.

Conclusion

China’s recent test launch represents its ongoing effort to develop and perfect its strategic capabilities that pose a threat not only to the United States and its allies in the Pacific but also directly to the U.S. homeland.

The widespread concern voiced by Pacific Island governments is a sign that Beijing's zeal to display military power may have created new opportunities for the United States and its allies to deepen security cooperation across the Pacific. As China continues to launch missile tests, including those in the South Pacific, the United States must continue to protect the American people by modernizing its missile defenses, reaffirming its defense commitments to its allies, and maintaining a favorable balance of power in the Pacific.

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