

China: The Forgotten Nuclear Power No More

China's nuclear arsenal expansion has sent mixed messages but regardless of intent will be an enduring problem for the US

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New evidence has surfaced that China may be expanding its nuclear arsenal – much more, and much faster than previously assumed.

Experts from the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation obtained satellite images showing work underway on the construction of more than 100 new missile silos near Yumen.

The evidence, which [dropped June 30](#), has since focused the minds of US national security experts – as might have been expected given Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s [description](#) of China as America’s “pacing challenge.”

The discussion is still fluid, but two interpretations are emerging. One [offers](#) that China is reacting to US actions and that Washington should pursue arms control with Beijing – negotiate to get both sides to limit their forces and avoid an arms race.

The other interpretation [holds](#) that the new discovery means that there is a nuclear dimension to Chinese President Xi Jinping’s [promise](#) that China will have “the dominant position” in the world by 2049, and that Washington should double down on deterrence, including by fully modernizing its nuclear arsenal and more.

Yet neither negotiating arms control nor strengthening deterrence is a straightforward solution – nor are the two necessarily mutually exclusive. The Chinese nuclear arsenal, like other facets of Chinese power, is going to be an enduring problem for the United States.

As Admiral John Aquilino, the new Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, [put it](#) during his confirmation hearing earlier this year: “China is a long-term challenge that must be ‘managed’ rather than ‘solved.’”

The arms control response

Anyone with a cursory knowledge of US-China strategic relations is aware that the United

States is a major driver of [China's nuclear modernization program](#). Beijing is concerned by Washington's nuclear superiority and its improved ability to find and destroy Chinese forces, or to intercept them with missile defenses.

China, plainly, fears that the United States might become capable of putting it in checkmate, achieving what Chinese diplomats call "absolute security."

To solve that problem, Beijing has been expanding and perfecting its arsenal. In addition to building more nuclear weapons, it is investing in road-mobile missiles and sea-based platforms because these systems make it more difficult for Washington to target its forces, and it is adding multiple independent re-entry vehicles to its missiles to penetrate US missile defenses.

Of late, Beijing also seems to have embraced tactical nuclear use and nuclear warfighting options. In [unofficial dialogs](#), Chinese strategists make clear that China's modernization program is directed at the United States and, by extension, its allies.

Countering the United States and its allies is not the sole driver, however. In private discussions, Chinese strategists confess that Beijing is increasingly motivated by nuclear developments in India. As one such strategist explained: "Beijing now regards India as a deterrence problem, not as a proliferation problem."

Chinese strategists are less forthcoming when asked whether Beijing considers Russia when it does defense planning, but some admit it is a factor.

While it is unclear if North Korea impacts Chinese calculations, it would be foolish to assume that defense planners in Beijing do not also contemplate conflict with their nuclear-armed neighbor given their complicated relationship.

Finally, analysts have [explained](#) that domestic and organizational factors are driving the Chinese modernization program as well.

The idea that a US push for arms control with China could solve the problem, then, is not obvious.

It's also not as if the United States had never tried. Since the 2000s, Washington sought to jump-start bilateral nuclear dialogue with Beijing for that purpose. Yet neither Washington's initial "patient" approach nor, from the mid-2010s, its more confrontational stance, has yielded results. Beijing has declined to engage.

The United States could try harder. Chinese strategists have long [insisted](#) that a US statement recognizing that the United States and China are in a situation of mutual vulnerability would help establish a foundation upon which US-China strategic stability can be built, despite the asymmetry of forces between the two countries.

Put differently, a US "vulnerability acknowledgment" could entice Beijing to engage in dialogue and arms control.

Research currently conducted by this author, however, suggests that it is not a given and that, in any case, an agreement would not emerge quickly. So deterrence will play an important - and possibly growing - role in US-China relations regardless of whether there is movement on arms control.

The deterrence response

The deterrers, unlike the arms controllers, think that engaging China is pointless. They believe that the latest news makes clear that China seeks nuclear parity with, perhaps even dominance over, the United States, and they argue that Washington should counter with a major nuclear update.

Without minimizing the problem, maintaining perspective about China's nuclear build-up is essential. The US Department of Defense [estimates](#) that China's stockpile is in the low hundreds – a fraction of the US and Russian stockpiles, which are in the low thousands.

So, neither a doubling, tripling or even quadrupling of China's stockpile would come close to US and Russian stockpile levels.

It is also unclear whether China seeks nuclear parity or dominance. Some analysts [have the opinion](#) that the latest evidence may show Beijing playing a shell game – moving a small number of missiles across a big matrix of silos to prevent its adversaries from locating the missiles.

It is a possibility worth considering, especially given that the United States has systematically [over-predicted](#) the future size of the Chinese arsenal.

More problematically, focusing on the quantitative growth of China's arsenal risks underestimating its qualitative improvement – which is where Beijing has made the most progress.



A formation of Dongfeng-17 missiles takes part in a military parade during the celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China at Tian'anmen Square in Beijing.

Photo: Xinhua / Mao Siqian

Beijing has not only strengthened the survivability of its forces. It also seems to have developed [new missions](#). With its new intermediate-range, dual-capable missiles, Beijing is now able to conduct limited nuclear counterforce use.

Beijing is also improving the readiness of its force, including by mating warheads with missiles (a first for China), and possibly moving towards a launch-on-warning posture.

Moreover, Beijing has been increasing its cyber and space power, and it is developing an integrated deterrence posture, notably through its [Strategic Support Force](#).

This overview suggests that China poses little risk of nuclear aggression against the United States and that this will remain unchanged in the foreseeable future.

The danger was high in the US-Soviet context during the Cold War, and it has not disappeared in US-Russia relations today.

It is low in the US-China context because the Chinese arsenal is and will remain limited in comparison to the US arsenal. China will simply not have a first-user advantage against the United States.

What is present, however, is a risk of nuclear escalation in a conflict. With a more sophisticated arsenal, Beijing may become more aggressive at the conventional level, which could lead to wars and nuclear use.

One pathway to such use is a situation in which China is losing a war – for instance over Taiwan – and launches limited nuclear strikes to force the United States to give up the fight.

Another is a situation in which, again during a war, the United States hits Chinese nuclear forces with conventional weapons, prompting Beijing to go nuclear with its remaining forces. This is not far-fetched given the increasing [entanglement](#) between Chinese nuclear and conventional forces.

To be sure, the open-ended nature of China’s nuclear build-up raises legitimate questions for the United States about nuclear policy, strategy and force planning, especially given that Washington, for the first time, faces two major nuclear-armed adversaries – Russia and China – that are growing their forces and deepening their strategic cooperation.



Russian and Chinese soldiers take aim in a 2018 joint military exercise. Image: Twitter

US nuclear deterrence is also important because it provides an essential backstop to out-of-control escalation.

But doubling down on nuclear deterrence will do little to address the rising risk of conflict and limited nuclear escalation with China. This problem is best solved with stronger conventional deterrence and tighter alliance relationships – to deter Chinese adventurism below the nuclear threshold – and, if there is a conflict, good crisis management with Beijing to prevent nuclear escalation, at least inadvertent escalation.

So, even from a deterrence perspective, there is a role for engagement with China. This is important, and it's worth noting that the 1963 US-Soviet [hotline agreement](#) – a crisis management mechanism – was a prelude to arms control.

Just over 20 years ago, a few analysts [lamented](#) that China was a “forgotten nuclear power.” Today, Russia is still the United States’ primary nuclear problem, but China is taking center stage.

Addressing nuclear China will be challenging, and neither arms control nor deterrence will, alone, be enough. The United States needs a more sophisticated approach, one for which it can – and should – lay down markers in the next US Nuclear Posture Review.

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Featured image: China's nuclear stockpile has been growing rapidly. Image: Pacific Forum / iStock

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