

# Chinese Nuclear Policy

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# Traditional policy and recent changes

- Change in numbers
  - Publicly available information:
    - For decades: ~200 weapons
    - 2020: low 200s (DoD)
    - 2023: 500 (DoD)
  - DoD annual report to Congress:
    - 700 in 2027; 1,000 in 2030; 1,500 by 2035
- Change in structure: nuclear triad
  - ICBM silos
  - Road-mobile ICBMs
  - SSBNs
  - Strategic bombers



# Traditional policy and recent changes

- Changes in operational posture
  - Traditionally low alert status
  - Rapid response, combat ready status, potential LOW (launch on warning)
- Change in narratives
  - “lean and effective”
  - 2021: “high-level strategic deterrent... system”
  - 2022: “powerful strategic deterrent capabilities system”
- Rejecting arms control talks (recent US-China meeting)



# Why the buildup? Technical-level concerns?

- New technological threats
  - Missile defense, CPGS, advanced sensors, cyber, etc.
  - Missile defense:
    - Worst-case scenario thinking; even a small U.S. homeland missile defense system could be threatening
  - Demise of the INF treaty; conventional counterforce?
  - How to maintain the nuclear balance?

# Limits of technical-level factors

- Technical-level factors cannot account for the new buildup
  - Lack of abrupt change of U.S. capability or policy
  - Silos not ideal for addressing missile defense concern (primary Chinese technical concern)
  - Chinese experts not aware of nuclear buildup and do not understand the rationale
  - Chinese officials cited other reasons (safety and security)

# Political level consideration: “Profound changes unseen in hundreds of years”

- How Chinese leadership, especially Mr. Xi, sees the problem
- **Mao Zedong:** imperialist countries “look down upon us because we don’t have atomic bombs and only have grenades...therefore China should have atomic bombs and develop hydrogen bombs as soon as possible.”
- **Deng Xiaoping:** if China was to have a higher status and more say in the future world order, it must be backed by a strong nuclear power.
- **Jiang Zemin:** “strive to build a lean and effective strategic nuclear force commensurate with China's great power status.”
- **Hu Jintao:** “build a strategic missile force commensurate with China’s major power status.”
- **Xi Jinping:** “construct...a strong military that is commensurate with China’s international status...”

# Political level consideration: “Profound changes unseen in hundreds of years”

- Xi, a structural realist: believing the structural change in international balance of power leads to “hostile” policy of the United States.
- Two phases of nuclear decision-making under Xi
  - Since 2012, Chinese Dream + Dream of Strong Army (anticipating U.S. hostility; preventive measures)
    - 2015; 2016; 2018
    - “Strategic counterbalance”
  - Development of perception of existential threat
    - Internally: concentration of power; removal of checks & balances; heavy-handed approach to promote internal stability
    - Externally: more assertive foreign and security policy
    - Self-fulfilling prophecy
    - Worst strategic environment since Tian’anmen incident in 1989; could be worse (U.S. focus on China)
    - Further acceleration of buildup

# China's pursuit of strategic stability

- Military level: mutual nuclear vulnerability
  - Narrow definition of “strategic stability”
  - No nuclear conflict or coercion
- Broader effect of stabilization
  - Broad definition of “strategic stability”
  - No conventional military coercion
  - More conciliatory approach toward China in general: Taiwan, economic coercion, foreign policy, etc.; Enhance regime security.
    - U.S. view on Cold War experiences is different.
  - Russia example



# China's pursuit of strategic stability

- Views its nuclear expansion as enhancing stability
- Consistent with growing power politics mindset
  - Structural realism + concerns of U.S. strategic culture
    - Xi: China has no aggressive DNA. (Alastair Iain Johnston: “China’s Contribution to the US-China Security Dilemma”, in “After Engagement: Dilemmas in U.S.-China Security Relations”)
  - Fatalism: little can be done through persuasion/diplomacy to change the U.S. policy on China

# Other domestic drivers

- A top-down process
  - Previous top-level constraint
  - “If loyalty is not absolute, it is absolutely not loyalty”
  - Reported corruption: time pressure?
  - Prioritization of silo-based ICBMs
  - Much less checks and balances
- Arms race risk
  - Step-by-step expansion could still lead to nuclear arms race
  - Counterproductive result
- Crisis escalation risk
  - Rapid response; early warning and launch under attack/launch on warning
  - Dual-capable missiles

# Nuclear risk over the Taiwan Strait

- Pushing nuclear closer to the forefront of China-U.S. security relationship
- Risks of misunderstandings
  - Who wants a war
  - Who wants to use nuclear weapons first
- Growing Chinese interest in developing nuclear escalation management capabilities
  - Proportional retaliation against regional targets
    - More accurate theater-range nuclear systems: DF-21, DF-26, DF-17 (?)
  - Departure from traditional thinking: nuclear escalation less unimaginable; more realistic nuclear planning
  - Harder to maintain minimum deterrence

# Impact of third-party countries: Russia

- Russia's influence on China's nuclear thinking
- How does China see the Russian nuclear saber-rattling during the Ukraine war?
  - Deliberate use of nuclear threat to achieve non-nuclear security interests
- Russia-China nuclear cooperation
  - Joint strategic bomber patrols; missile defense; early warning
  - Future possibilities?
    - Nuclear submarine technologies (AUKUS)?
- China does not appreciate U.S. concerns about two near-peer nuclear competitors

# Impact of third-party countries: DPRK

- Simultaneous development of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons
  - Ambition to acquire a secure second-strike capability against the U.S. homeland
    - Compare with China
  - Destabilizing impact of tactical nuclear weapons
    - Fuels regional arms race
- Challenges U.S.-China nuclear stability
- How China sees the problem
  - The U.S. “hegemonic” interests lead to North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons
  - U.S. allies should not feel threatened
  - The U.S. is fueling the tensions and undermining global nonproliferation regime
    - ROK; Japan
- Geopolitical interests take precedence over nonproliferation norms

# What can be done?

- Need to address underlying political-level disputes
  - China's goal of making U.S. accept "strategic stability": Shelve disputes, accept China as is.
  - Whose interest to sacrifice? Long-term sustainability? Need to address underlying disputes.
  - Understand the existence and negative impact of information/perception gap.
  - Scholars/experts should work to promote open society (most important risk reduction measure)
- Promote a No-First-Use debate?
  - General standard of a credible NFU policy?
  - A limited Taiwan Strait NFU between the U.S. and China?

# What can be done?

- Empower Chinese experts
  - Chinese experts are increasingly marginalized in domestic decision-making
  - Joint regional expert-level dialogues (bilateral or multilateral)
    - Clarify policy misunderstandings
    - Overcome traditional suspicions, such as on the issue of verification