

IN STAND-OFF, KEEPING AN EYE ON THE NUCLEAR BALL

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Despite domestic and external challenges, there is now growing evidence that the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to expand its nuclear arsenal, which is worrisome but at the same time, not be surprising. China is pursuing a planned modernisation of its nuclear arsenal because it fears the multi-layered missile defence capabilities of the United States. It is arming its missiles with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs) capabilities to neutralise America's missile shield. China's DF-31As, which are road mobile Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), are equipped with MIRVs and potent penetration aids.

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The Peoples Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) also fields a range of Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) and Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs). The PRC's ballistic missile tests in 2019 were the highest among the designated Nuclear Weapon States (NWS). China's Lop Nur was the site of Chinese sub-critical testing since the PRC adopted a moratorium on hot testing in 1996, enabling China to miniaturise warheads and develop new designs that have been progressively integrated into its nuclear arsenal. The PRC also sits on a sizeable inventory of fissile material. China, according to the International Panel on Fissile Materials (IPFM) is estimated to possess 2.9+-0.6 metric tonnes of Weapons-grade Plutonium (WGP) compared to India's is 0.6+-0.15 tonnes of WGP.

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China's expansion is cause for concern because even as the U.S. and Russia are attempting to reduce the size of their respective arsenals, the PRC is on an expansionist mode. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) observes that China's nuclear arsenal has risen from 290 warheads in 2019 to 320 warheads in 2020.

This increase might not seem large relative to the size of the nuclear arsenal of the U.S. and Russia but it indicates a gradual shift toward a larger arsenal. This presents India with challenges because New Delhi has to contend with a nuclear-armed Pakistan as well. The Indian nuclear arsenal, according to the SIPRI, stands at roughly 150 nuclear warheads with the Pakistani slightly ahead with 160 warheads. The Chinese state mouthpiece, *Global Times*, has recently called for a 1,000-warhead nuclear arsenal, underlining the motivation of the PLA and the hard-line factions of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to match U.S. and Russian nuclear force levels.

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While these numbers are important, what is equally, if not more, consequential for New Delhi is what China's nuclear modernisation and diversified nuclear capabilities are likely to do for conventional military escalation along the China-India boundary. The conventional military balance between Indian and Chinese forces along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) presents significant challenges for Indian decision-makers. Given the variegated and highly sophisticated nature of Chinese nuclear capabilities relative to India, they give Beijing considerable coercive leverage. Beijing could commit further aggression under the cover of its nuclear arsenal.

Indeed, the PRC has already engaged in nuclear signalling with set piece videos, which have been doing the rounds on social media platforms. The message is clear to New Delhi from China's leadership: we have presented you with a *fait accompli*; accept it and move on. Beijing is communicating that an escalatory response from New Delhi will incur punitive responses with China mounting aggressive military action at several points along the LAC. However, this time it will be more consequential, unlike the last in March-April when the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) mounted a rapid tactical offensive to occupy small territory at Pangong Tso and caught the Indian Army by surprise. Notwithstanding efforts to de-escalate particularly at Patrolling Point 14 (PP-14) in the Galwan River Valley, Hot Springs and Gogra, Chinese ground units have consolidated their position in the Pangong Tso area and the entire stretch of the LAC. To be sure, India is doing the same, but the Fingers 4 to 8 in Pangong Tso, where the PLA is entrenched, is a serious potential flashpoint as the Indian Army is locked in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation against its Chinese adversary. It could become a staging ground for further PLA ingress, notwithstanding Indian defensive preparations, triggering hostilities that widen to the Karakoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese nuclear arsenal could serve as an instrument of coercion under which the PRC could press ahead with a limited aims war.

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Consequently, Indian decision-makers need to be aware of the PLARF's land-based missile forces. The PRC is believed to base a part of its nuclear arsenal in inland territories such as in the Far-Western Xinjiang Region, which is close to Aksai Chin. China's land-based missiles are a primarily road mobile and could play a key role in any larger conventional offensive the PLA might mount against Indian forces along the LAC.

Korla in Xinjiang is believed to host DF-26 IRBMs with a range of 4,000 kilometres, which can potentially strike targets across most of India. Their mobility gives them a high degree of survivability. The DF-26 IRBMs can be armed with either a conventional or nuclear warhead. Since the IRBMs could be either conventional or nuclear tipped, assessing Chinese trip-wires will make things tricky as the PLARF's conventional and nuclear forces are likely to be embedded together, presenting challenges for both the Indian civilian and military leadership.

Thus, conventional escalation between Chinese and Indian forces along the LAC must factor the role of nuclear weapons and their impact on military operations executed by the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force. India's Strategic Forces Command (SFC) needs to be on a heightened state of alert to ward off Chinese nuclear threats and brinksmanship as well as geared to support India's conventional forces.

While escalation of the current stand-off between Indian and Chinese forces is not inevitable, it would be a terrible mistake on the part of the Indian government to ignore the possibility, because it might not come from New Delhi but Beijing.

Whatever the outcome of the current crisis, New Delhi should start seriously assessing its extant nuclear doctrine and redouble efforts to get a robust triadic capability for deterrence.

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