

# KEEPING A CLOSE EYE ON CHINA'S NUCLEAR CAPABILITIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The only real substantive outcome of last week's virtual summit between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping has been some unconfirmed reports of the two sides, the United States and China, agreeing to hold strategic nuclear talks sometime in the near future. This development comes against the backdrop of the China Military Power Report (CMPR) recently released by the Pentagon that categorically underscores the growing challenge posed by the increasing capabilities of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its ambitions across various dimensions of military power. The PRC's nuclear capabilities, in particular, are undergoing a fundamental transformation and a shift seems to be evident in both the quantity and the quality of the PRC's atomic arsenal. Even before the release of the CMPR, there was significant concern globally about the trajectory of China's strategic capabilities. Confirmation provided by the CMPR reveals four specific areas where change is underway — quantitative strength, atomic yield, delivery capabilities and posture.

First is the size of the PRC's nuclear arsenal, which is set to increase. Hitherto, the PRC's nuclear arsenal has hovered at roughly 200 nuclear warheads, half of which directed at the United States (U.S.). By 2027, the CMPR estimates that this number is likely to increase to 700 weapons consisting of varying yields which is three and half times the current Chinese warhead strength.

### Keeping an eye on China's expanding nuclear stack

Second, the PRC is likely to privilege expansion in the direction of low-yield weapons. Low-yield weapons have been an area of interest and development for the PRC. They are weapons meant for battlefield use during conventional military operations and against conventional targets such as concentrations of armoured, artillery and infantry forces. Lower yield warheads help the PRC avoid causing collateral damage. Prior to the release of the CMPR, evidence that the PRC was testing low-yield devices has periodically surfaced in years past.

In April 2020, the U.S. State Department's Findings on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments drew attention to the PRC's deliberate opacity in the use of explosive containment chambers and excavations at its Lop Nur nuclear facility to test low yield weapons and Beijing's refusal to grant permission to access data from its International Monitoring System (IMS) stations to the Data Centre under the operational authority of the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO). Actions of this kind have evoked strategic concern and increasingly confirm that China's atomic arsenal consists of a large number of low-yield weapons ideal for battlefield use.

Third, these low-yield nuclear warheads are also likely to find their way into a key delivery capability — the PRC's Dong-Feng-26 (DF-26) ballistic missile. This missile has already undergone deployment at Korla in the Xinjiang region in Western China. It is an Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) which is launched from a Transporter Erector Launcher (TEL). Indeed, the DF-26 has featured in extensive training exercises west of Jilantai in inner Mongolia. In addition to the DF-26, China has also developed the JL-2 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) with a range of 7,200 kilometres capable of striking targets across continental

Asia.

In stand-off, keeping an eye on the nuclear ball

Finally, China's move towards a Launch on Warning (LoW) nuclear posture marks an important shift in the PRC's commitment to ensuring that no adversary doubts its response in the event of a nuclear first strike. A higher alert posture not only risks reducing the threshold for nuclear use in the form of preemption but it could also sow the seeds of miscalculation and unintended nuclear use.

The PRC's nuclear competition with the United States will have a cascading effect. For India there are some serious implications with China's increasingly minatory nuclear military capabilities. First, the size of China's nuclear arsenal complicates the potency of India's nuclear arsenal and it is especially true in the face of the PRC's pursuit of missile defences in the form of the HQ-19 interceptors, which are specifically designed and developed to execute mid-course interception of medium-range ballistic missiles. A significantly larger Chinese nuclear arsenal paired to missile defences will limit damage to the PRC and more menacingly threatens the survivability of the Indian nuclear arsenal.

China denies testing 'hypersonic missile'

Reinforcing this is Beijing's pursuit of a Launch on Warning (LoW) posture. Such a posture reduces the decision time for any Indian retaliatory nuclear strike in the heat of a war or crisis and places pressure on India to pursue its own LoW. Despite Beijing's pursuit of No First Use (NFU), which is reversible, the PRC could also significantly degrade an Indian retaliatory strike if China chooses to resort to First Use (FU) of nuclear weapons, and even worse outrightly decapitate India's nuclear forces. Indian strategic planners will have to think about the quantitative nuclear balance and India's nuclear posture *vis-à-vis* the PRC.

Finally, India must pay close attention to the sub-surface leg of the PRC's nuclear arsenal. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese have added two new Type 094 (Jin class) SSBNs/nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines to their existing fleet. The maritime dimension of China's nuclear capabilities might not be an immediate strategic challenge but will potentially become one in the coming years for New Delhi. The Chinese Navy has carried out bathymetric and ocean mapping surveys in the Indian Ocean crucial to the execution of sub-surface military operations. The Bay of Bengal whose sea depth is very conducive for nuclear submarine missions will leave India exposed to a Chinese atomic pincer from the maritime domain in addition to the continental domain. New Delhi will have to specifically watch the pattern in the People Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) nuclear submarine deployments and address the deficit in its subsurface nuclear delivery capabilities.

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The recent arrest of a former bank chairman points to attempts to hijack the recovery and resolution process

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