

# CHINA, U.S. FLAUNT NUCLEAR MUSCLE

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

Quietly, the rapidly deteriorating ties between China and the United States — often dubbed a “trade war”— are acquiring a military edge. In the midst of the downslide in the relationship, which first began in the form of rising tariff walls and Washington’s efforts to deny high technology to China, Beijing has begun to stiffen its nuclear deterrent.

On October 9, the state-run *Global Times* reported that the flight trial of China’s new-generation stealth bomber Hong-20 may take place soon. Two months ago, China’s official television station had confirmed the name of the bomber. Military expert Song Zhongping said the disclosure of the new bomber amounted to “potential deterrence” as it would “enable the Army to possess stronger nuclear and conventional deterrence”.

## The nuclear triad

A credible strategic bomber is an essential part of the nuclear triad — resting on the bedrock of a full range of nuclear missiles and submarines powered by atomic engines, which can launch nuclear-tipped Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles. China has unveiled the progress on the strategic bomber, apparently the weak link in its nuclear triad, in tune with spiralling tensions with the U.S.

The game of smoke and mirrors began to intensify when in an earlier article, *Global Times* reported that during a “morale-boosting gala” held by China’s strategic bomber division, “the silhouette of a mysterious aircraft appeared” in a logo displayed on a big screen. The silhouette had “angled winglets” unlike China’s in-service H-6 bomber, according to the report. There has been considerable media speculation on the range of Hong-20. Most write-ups say new aircraft could fly up to 8,000 km. But there are also other reports in the Chinese media that claim that the plane would in the end have a target range of 12,000 km. It is expected that Chinese designers would build a bomber that would have the U.S. west coast in its cross-hairs, even if that means reducing firepower, by not carrying the maximum estimated bomb load of 10 tonnes. The disclosures about the H-20’s capability follows several state-media articles suggesting that China is facing a “full-spectrum” assault from the Trump administration, minus the use of military force.

In tune with the escalation of tensions that threatens a full-blown Cold War, the U.S. too has amplified signals that it is in no mood to back off. Two American B-52 bombers flew over the disputed South China Sea on Tuesday, just ahead of a meeting in Singapore between U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis and his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe. The two planes took off from the Anderson Air Force Base in Guam for their “routine training mission in the vicinity of the South China Sea”, a U.S. statement said. The flights were part of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s continuous bomber presence operations since March 2004, and their presence was “consistent with international law and [a] long-standing commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific,” said the statement.

Analysts say that in their back-and-forth with the Americans, the Chinese are confident that overall, they have a robust nuclear deterrent, based on a nuclear missile core. While military hardware, mostly domestically produced, may not be a problem, the Chinese may encounter difficulties in steeling their chain of command, as a large number of senior officers have been sacked under President Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign. Without the “software” of combat-

tested human capital, the Chinese military deterrent may still be a work in progress.

***On October 9, the Global Times reported that the flight trial of China's new-generation bomber Hong-20 may take place soon, which analysts say would boost the country's nuclear deterrence***

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