

The Looking Glass

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The Pentagon's China Military Power Report

Growing Capabilities and Malign Intentions?

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Background

Since [2000](#) the Pentagon, under Section 1202 of the National Defense Authorization Act, has submitted an annual report to the US Congress “on the current and future military strategy of the People’s Republic of China” with a particular focus on “current and probable future course of military-technological development” of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and “the tenets and probable development of Chinese grand strategy, security strategy, and military strategy, and of its military organizations and operational concepts”.

Earlier this month the [latest](#) version of what has come to be referred to as the “China Military Power Report” (CMPR) was released. As in the past this year’s CMPR provides a wealth of detail on China’s ongoing military modernization, capabilities acquisitions, evolving military doctrine, and strategic posture. Coming at a time of heightened tension and the apparent open embrace of “strategic competition” as the organising principle of Sino-US relations in both capitals, this CMPR is perhaps more significant than usual not only for what it tells us about China’s military power and ambitions but also what it tells us about American perceptions of Chinese power. With respect to the former, while some [reporting](#) has tended toward alarmism, it is clear that China’s military modernization has [continued](#) on trend [lines](#) established for some time that make the PLA a more capable instrument of Chinese power.

What is striking about this CMPR however is the clear reframing of the assessment of China’s objectives. This CMPR, in contrast to previous years, asserts that Beijing wants to “match or surpass U.S. global influence and power, displace U.S. alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, and revise the international order to be more advantageous to Beijing’s authoritarian system and national interests”. In essence the CMPR presents a picture of a Chinese military that is growing more capable in tandem with the development of “revisionist” strategic objectives.

Growing Capabilities

The CMPR provides rich detail on the PLA’s acquisition, development and deployment of new capabilities across its service components. However, the headline items concern new developments in China’s nuclear forces and posture, deployment of new missile systems, enhanced expeditionary capabilities, and its push to master “intelligentized” warfare.



Nuclear triad and nuclear posture

China's efforts to modernize its nuclear arsenal have been in [train](#) for some time. The focus has been to develop and deploy a nuclear triad (strategic bombers, nuclear-armed ICBMs, and SLBMs) to [enhance](#) the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent. The CMPR makes clear that China has made significant ground toward this objective. While the [2020 CMPR](#) estimated that China had a nuclear warhead inventory numbering in the low 200s, this year's asserts that the "accelerating pace of the PRC's nuclear expansion may enable the PRC to have up to 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027" and it "likely intends to have at least 1,000 warheads by 2030".

The bulk of this expansion is accounted for by increases in China's land-based ICBM capabilities and that the PLA Navy's (PLAN) nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) are now in fact operational. The CMPR notes here that although China *currently* has approximately 150 ICBMs, including solid-fuelled "silo-based CSS-4 Mod 2 (DF-5A) and Mod 3 (DF-5B)" and "road-mobile CSS-10-class (DF-31, DF-31A and DF-31AG)" missiles, the expansion of the ICBM force indicated by the building of [new](#) ICBM silo fields looks set to put China on the path to field an ICBM force "comparable" to those of other major nuclear powers. Moreover, a number of these ICBM types, such as the DF-5B, are capable of being equipped with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs).

China's SSBN capabilities meanwhile are judged to have advanced to the extent that it now possesses a "visible sea-based nuclear deterrent". This capability is based on six operational [Jin-class](#) Type 094 SSBNs that each carry up to 12 CSS-N-14 (JL-2) SLBMs with a range of 7,200km. Such performance parameters the CMPR notes would require that the SSBNs carrying them would have to "operate in areas north and east of Hawaii if the PRC seeks to target the east coast of the United States".

Additionally, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has also invested in the development of a nuclear-capable air-launched ballistic missile (ALBM) system for the [H-6N](#) bomber. The H-6N was first fielded by the PLAAF in 2020 and the CMPR notes that it provides an additional "platform for the air component of the PRC's nascent nuclear triad" to complement its older bomber variants based on the Soviet Tupolev Tu-16 (Badger).

These developments taken together suggest a shift in Chinese nuclear posture away from its long-standing reliance on a "minimum deterrent" posture to what analysts [Hans Kristensen and Matthew Korda](#) term a "medium deterrent" posture that "will position China between the smaller nuclear-armed states (France, Britain, Pakistan, India, Israel, and North Korea) and the two big ones (Russia and the United States)".

China's ICBM silo expansion and its August 2021 test of a [Gliding Fractional Orbital Bombardment System](#) (G-FOBS) suggests a concern to reduce the vulnerability of its nuclear deterrent to a first-strike and a desire to counter the potential effects of US ballistic missile defence (BMD). Increasing the number of solid-fuelled ICBM silos in concert with continued deployment of mobile ICBM launch systems that China has historically deployed will increase the chances that more ICBMs would survive a first-strike by both increasing the number of targets a potential attacker would have to hit but also by



replacing China older liquid-fuelled ICBMs that take longer to fuel and arm. By increasing the number of ICBM silos and equipping them with MIRVs China is also likely attempting to increase the chances that some of its warheads can penetrate BMD systems. G-FOBS is also arguably compelled by the same [logic](#) as the slower speed and non-parabolic flight of such a capability would make it difficult for US BMD and early-warning systems to detect.

Finally, the CMPR suggests that China is moving toward a “launch on warning” (LOW) posture – i.e. a retaliatory strike is launched upon warning of enemy nuclear attack while its missiles are still in the air and before detonation occurs – similar to that adopted (and since maintained) by Russia and the United States during the Cold War. It notes that China “probably seeks to keep at least a portion of its force on a LOW posture, and since 2017, the PLARF has conducted exercises involving early warning of a nuclear strike and launch on warning responses” while it has “made advances in early warning needed to support a LOW posture” such as ground-based large array radars.

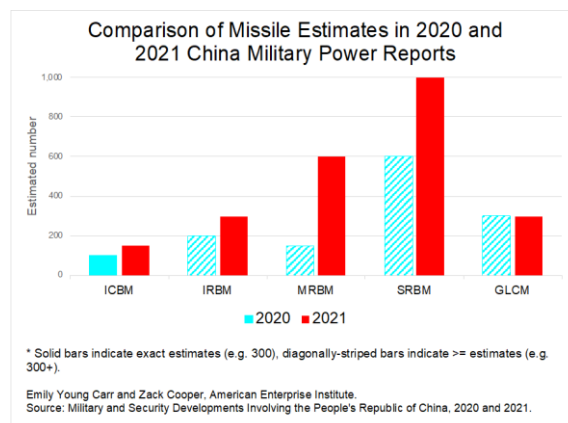
Increase in ballistic missile capabilities

China has also undertaken a significant expansion of its ballistic missile capabilities largely under the control of the [PLA Rocket Force](#) (PLARF). The CMPR notes that in addition to ICBMs China now has the following missile capabilities:

- 300 IRBMs, est. range of 3,000km-5,500km
- 600 MRBMs, est. range 1,000km-3,000km, including the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV)
- 1000 SRBMs, est. range 300km-1,000km
- 300 GLCMs, est. range <1,500km

This, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, represents a significant increase on estimates for such capabilities in the 2020 CMPR with the sharpest increases in MRBMs and SRBMs.

Figure 1: Comparison of missile estimates in CMPR 2020 and 2021



The sharp increases in MRBMs and SRBMs is consistent with the desire “to provide options for the PRC to attempt to dissuade, deter, or, if ordered,



defeat third-party intervention during a large-scale, theater campaign such as a Taiwan contingency” and contributes to the PLARF’s ability to meet its “comprehensive deterrence and warfighting” mission.

Expeditionary capabilities

The [2020 CMPR](#) identified locations that China may have been considering for bases and/or logistical hubs. While [analysts](#) have observed increasing Chinese ambitions to develop and deploy capabilities to defend and enhance the country’s overseas interests for some time, recent legal and military developments appear to have formalised some of these ambitions.

The 2021 CMPR notes that the 26 December 2020 revision to China’s [National Defense Law](#) formally tasks the PLA with defending the country’s “overseas development interests”. Its capacity to meet this objective are based on the development of expeditionary capabilities across the PLA Army (PLAA), PLA Navy (PLAN), and PLA Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC):

- PLAA: 15 Special Operations Brigades and Aviation and Air Assault units with the former focused on direct action, infiltration, island-landing, and reconnaissance missions and the later on airborne insertion, reconnaissance and coordination of air strikes;
- PLAN: Liaoning and Shandong aircraft carriers; a “modest number” of Yuzhao-class ocean-going amphibious platform docks (LPDs) and Yushen-class flat deck landing helicopter assault (LHAs) ships; commission of Renhai-class guided missile cruisers (CG); and launching of 25 Luyang-class guided missile destroyers (DDG);
- PLANMC: the PLAN’s land combat arm has expanded from 2 brigades to 10 in order to meet Xi Jinping’s directive for it to become a “multi-functional rapid response” force to protect Chinese personnel and interests overseas;

Although China at present has the one overseas military base in Djibouti, the CMPR notes that Beijing “has likely considered” the following countries to host either PLA bases or logistics facilities: Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan.

The CMPR concludes that while PLAA’s capabilities provide China with “a limited capability to project ground power as an expeditionary force . . . [including] to speed up its transition from regional defense to trans-theater operations”, it is those of the PLAN that are the most developed and most clearly demonstrate China’s desire to acquire the necessary capabilities to mount expeditionary operations and project power beyond the East Asian littoral.

“Intelligentized” warfare

Since the end of the Cold War the PLA has been focused on adapting to the “revolution in military affairs” (RMA). Under Xi Jinping’s leadership intense emphasis has been placed on transitioning from “informationalized” warfare (i.e. leveraging the information technology revolution) to “intelligentized” warfare that seeks to



harness the innovations of the “[fourth industrial revolution](#)” such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and autonomous systems to China’s military advantage.

Central to this objective is “military-civil fusion” (MCF), a strategy that [builds](#) on previous PLA efforts to meet its demand for new technologies by [plugging](#) the military directly into China’s burgeoning commercial tech sector to acquire capabilities at the leading edge of the “fourth industrial revolution”. The CMPR notes that the long-term goal is “to create an entirely self-reliant defense-industrial sector—fused with a strong civilian industrial and technology sector—that can meet the PLA’s needs for modern capabilities”.

The importance attached to this objective is indicated by the [comment](#) in 2017 of no less than Xi Jinping that the PLA must “aim at the frontier of global military scientific and technological developments” as under a “situation of increasingly fierce international military competition, only the innovators win”. The CMPR assesses that although China has the “political will and fiscal strength” to develop a self-reliant military industrial sector, will in the near-term continue to “import foreign equipment, technologies, and knowledge to fill some critical, near-term capability gaps and accelerate its modernization”.

CMPR Bottom Line: Overlap of Capabilities and Intentions = Revisionism?

As noted above, the 2021 CMPR is clear in its judgement that such Chinese military capabilities are part of an integrated strategy to “match or surpass U.S. global influence and power, displace U.S. alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, and revise the international order to be more advantageous to Beijing’s authoritarian system and national interests”. The CMPR therefore judges that the overlap between China’s military capabilities and its intentions make it a fundamental threat to the United States and security in the Asia-Pacific.

Some problems in assessing China’s intentions and capabilities

CMPR makes the case that the strides made in China’s military modernization are primarily designed to “revise aspects of the international order on the Party’s terms” as this is “essential to forging an external environment supportive of the PRC’s national rejuvenation”. Much of this assessment is based on a reading of top CCP leaders’ official pronouncements on a wide range of foreign and defence policy issues.

Although such statements are important they should also be framed by an understanding of the role of so-called “[top-level design](#)” in the policy-making process in China. Here, Party and government leaders and officials often make lofty and aspirational statements and directives which are intended to “steer” relevant bureaucracies, agencies and provincial governments toward implementation. China’s [MCF strategy](#), for instance, although officially envisaged as operating under a “carefully orchestrated architecture” has in fact been a much messier affair as agencies, local government and commercial enterprises compete for central largesse and pursue local and/or follow commercial interests.

More broadly, the CMPR’s assessment of China’s intentions tends to assume that desire equates to conduct – i.e. because a state or its leaders have a stated desire for particular outcomes that suit their preferences and values, this *automatically* translates into action.



While most states would like to operate in an international order that aligns more closely with their own specific preferences and values, such desires are not translated into actual behaviour in most cases. The key is to determine which factors may encourage a state to act on such desires. Intent without capability is exactly that, while intent *with* capability offers the *potential* to translate desires into actual behaviour.

If we accept that China has a clear intention to “surpass” the United States, a key question that remains is does it in fact have the capabilities to do so? The answer would have to be “not yet”. While the CMPR makes clear that China has made significant advances in key aspects of military power, in each of the areas discussed above a case can be made that such advances neither match nor surpass those maintained by the United States.

In the nuclear domain, for instance, while Chinese ICBM expansion is noteworthy in the context of China’s historical “minimum deterrent” posture, it is arguably driven by a desire to enhance the credibility of its nuclear deterrent in the face of the mature and numerically superior American nuclear triad and BMD capabilities. Growing expeditionary capabilities, in turn, are not in and of themselves a threat to the “rules based order” with, for instance, the PLAN’s involvement in international anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden contributing to safety and security of international maritime trade. Nonetheless such activities have provided the Chinese military with needed experience in coming to grips with non-traditional security challenges.

Further reading

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