

Why China's Nuclear Build-Up Should Worry the West
OP-ED

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COVID-19 has taught the world that the Chinese Communist Party's lies can have vast and terrible consequences. As the United States, our allies and our partners renew calls for transparency about the virus, we also urge Beijing to come clean about another danger: China's opaque and threatening nuclear weapons buildup.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union recognized that arms control served both our countries' national security. So, we engaged in a series of talks that allowed both sides to understand the nature of our respective nuclear arsenals. We established a framework to handle potentially deadly misunderstandings. As President Ronald Reagan famously said, citing a Russian proverb, "Trust, but verify."

Today, China allows no such transparency for the world's fastest-growing nuclear arsenal. Beijing refuses to disclose how many nuclear weapons it has, how many it plans to develop, or what it plans to do with them. It is the least transparent of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

Despite Beijing's secrecy about its nuclear activities, we know China is pursuing a nuclear triad on land, in the air and at sea, and that it is rapidly growing and modernizing its capabilities. General Secretary Xi Jinping champions this buildup. Soon after taking office in 2012, he described China's nuclear-weapons command as "support for China's status as a great power." He subsequently elevated that command to a standalone service called the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force as a part of his plan to build a "world-class" military by 2049.

Satellite imagery shows the PLA's advances toward that goal, with a 2019 military parade in Beijing featuring nuclear-capable missiles. The display stretched nearly 3 miles—almost 10 times longer than the same segment a decade ago, and certainly only a fraction of the total arsenal. The parade also showcased the Dongfeng-41 missile, which could strike America's shores in 30 minutes. The PLA will deploy this missile in silos and on mobile platforms in the near future, and we expect that—if current trends hold—China will at least double its total nuclear arsenal in the next decade. Beijing has done all this while exploiting the United States' decades-long compliance with ineffective arms-control agreements. While we were constrained by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty's limits on ground-launched missiles with a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometers, the PLA has fielded more than a thousand theater-range ballistic missiles near its coast. Many of these weapons are dual-capable, meaning they can be armed with nuclear as well as conventional warheads. They are intended to target U.S. forces in East Asia and to intimidate and coerce America's allies.

China's ballistic missiles aren't simply collecting dust. China launched more of them in both 2018 and 2019 than the rest of the world combined. In 2020, China test fired more than 220 ballistic missiles, exceeding its totals in either of the previous two years. Commercial satellite imagery reveals year-round activity at Lop Nur, China's nuclear weapons test site.

Paired with its weapons modernization, Beijing's nuclear posture is getting more aggressive, threatening even non-nuclear neighbors and undermining confidence in its so-called "No First Use"

policy. The Department of Defense's reports also show evidence that the PLA is moving to a "launch-on-warning" posture.

By contrast, the United States and other democracies uphold transparency and respect for international norms governing nuclear weapons. We participate in robust and reliable crisis communication networks with other nuclear powers, and we've encouraged Beijing to do the same. We also publicly release our Nuclear Posture Review, and we conduct biannual data exchanges with Russia on nuclear issues. Both France and the United Kingdom regularly produce statements detailing the numbers and types of nuclear weapons in their arsenals. China refuses to adopt these processes, instead clinging to secrecy as its preferred strategy.

Our calls for China's leaders to change course are reasonable. We've asked Beijing for transparency, and to join the United States and Russia in crafting a new arms control agreement covering all categories of nuclear weapons. The current U.S.-Russia New START Treaty limits our two countries' development of certain types of weapons, but leaves China free to continue its buildup unchecked. Any successor to New START must be expanded to include China. The United States has done its part to reduce nuclear dangers; it is time that China stopped posturing and began to comport itself responsibly.

We need America's friends in the fight, too. Many of our allies and partners—more than half of our NATO allies among them—have urged Beijing to come to the negotiating table. But too many countries, including champions of arms control who depend on America's nuclear deterrence capabilities, remain publicly silent about Beijing's buildup. All nations must urge China to honor its obligations under Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to pursue negotiations in good faith.

Over the past four years, the Trump administration has awakened the world to the China challenge. Beijing's two-decades-long asymmetric arms race is a core part of that challenge. It endangers the American homeland, our strategic positions in the Indo-Pacific, and our allies and partners. It is of concern to all peace-loving nations. We've briefed allies, partners and even the highest levels of the Russian government on China's nuclear buildup.

History teaches a valuable lesson about the best way forward. The United States, the Soviet Union and other nations recognized long ago that great powers must behave responsibly with the world's most dangerous weapons. So, too, must any nation with claims to greatness today.