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AUKUS: China's Nuclear Build Up

By Loro Horta

SYNOPSIS

In recent months several senior US officials have warned that China was becoming a serious nuclear threat. On 15 Sept 2021, we saw the emergence of AUKUS – a security arrangement between Australia, UK and the US to strengthen Australia's nuclear-powered submarine capability. A closer scrutiny reveals a far more complex reality about China's nuclear capacity.

COMMENTARY

ON 27 AUGUST 2021 Air Force Lieutenant-General Thomas Busiere, the deputy commander of the US Strategic Command overseeing US nuclear arsenal, said that China was becoming a greater nuclear [threat than Russia](#). According to several American officials, China's nuclear arsenal expansion and modernisation is not aimed at deterrence.

Is China's nuclear doctrine really changing from minimum deterrence to an offensive nuclear fighting one? A brief comparative analysis of China's nuclear forces with those of the United States reveals a far more complex picture.

China's Growing Nuclear Submarine Force

For decades China relied on about 20 Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles or ICBMs for its nuclear deterrence. According to the Pentagon, China's nuclear arsenal currently stands in the [low 200](#) and China aims to double its arsenal in the next 10 years. Not only is China expanding its nuclear arsenal, but, more importantly, it is modernising it.

To improve the survivability of its ICBMs the Second Artillery, China's missile force, is increasingly deploying more road-mobile ICBMs by installing them on trucks. To

decrease launching times, liquid fuel missiles are being replaced by solid fuel. China is also deploying growing numbers of ballistic missile submarines (SLBMs).

Nuclear armed ballistic missile submarines are the ultimate second-strike weapon. Submarines are hard to detect and can operate for extended periods of time. While land-based silos and air bases can be destroyed in a surprise first strike, it is very difficult to destroy several SLBMs in the first strike.

This gives China the ability to retaliate after any first strike on it. China currently operates six SLBMs while the US operates 14.

China's Nuclear Arsenal: Growing But Lagging

While China's nuclear arsenal is indeed growing and becoming more sophisticated, it remains well behind that of the US and Russia, both in terms of size and sophistication. According to the Pentagon's own estimates, China's nuclear arsenal is expected to surpass 400 nuclear warheads in the next decade.

According to the [Federation of American Scientists](#), the US currently possesses 1,600 deployed nuclear weapons and another 2,000 in storage. Based on this calculation by the end of the decade the US arsenal will be more than seven times larger than China's. Russia's nuclear arsenal is currently estimated at 1,600 deployed nuclear weapons and 2,897 in storage.

While China is expanding and modernising its nuclear forces, it is not abandoning its doctrine of limited deterrence. Unlike the US, China has a no-first use nuclear policy.

While US officials claim that China is expanding its nuclear arsenal very fast, the fact of the matter is that China's nuclear arsenal was outdated and small. China's nuclear stockpile is smaller than France's. It is not surprising that China, the world's second largest economy, is keen on changing this situation.

On 15 September 2021, Australia, United Kingdom and the US made a surprise announcement of their trilateral security arrangement. Under the AUKUS agreement, the US and UK will assist Australia in building several nuclear attack submarines.

While Washington has stated that the submarines would not be armed with nuclear weapons, the formation of AUKUS is likely to further accelerate the expansion of China's SLBM and nuclear attack submarine development.

Creating Credible Nuclear Deterrence

As tension with the US and its regional allies grows, Beijing is determined to create a credible nuclear deterrence. China remembers being threatened with nuclear war by the US during the Korean War and by the Soviet Union in their 1969 border war.

Therefore, by maintaining a credible nuclear deterrence China wants to ensure that in a possible regional conflict with the US, Washington will think twice about nuclear blackmail.

While China will continue to expand its nuclear forces, its main priority will remain the conventional forces, in particularly the navy, air force and conventional missile forces. President Xi Jinping has confidently declared that [by 2035](#) China will have a military equal to that of the US.

China is growing confident that in the coming years, its conventional forces would be capable of deterring the US in a regional conflict. However, due to the great disparity in the number of nuclear weapons, ICBMs and SLBMs, it would be foolish for China to want to engage in a nuclear exchange with the US.

Vicious Cycle of Action and Reaction

China's expansion and modernisation of its nuclear forces is also the result of American actions. To deal with what it terms as rogue states such as North Korea that are armed with nuclear weapons and ICBMs capable of targeting the continental US, the Americans have been developing theatre missile defence (TMD).

This is a system designed to intercept incoming missiles to counter the North Korean threat. TMDs are missile defence systems designed for the security of a specific region. The deployment of advanced theatre missile defence systems around China's periphery such as in South Korea and Japan compromises China's nuclear deterrence and in turn forces it to expand and modernise its forces to counter US advances in missile defence.

The US has legitimate reasons to want to expand its missile defence system and China can only be expected to react by expanding and modernising its nuclear forces. The only way to break this vicious cycle of action-reaction is through dialogue and negotiation. The US and Russia had in the past been able to negotiate arms reduction agreements that greatly enhanced world peace. The same spirit is needed now for the Asia-Pacific and the wider Indo-Pacific regions.

Loro Horta served as Timor Leste Ambassador to Cuba and Counselor at the Timor Leste Embassy in Beijing. He is a graduate of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore; the Chinese National Defense University; the US Naval Post Graduate School; and the American National Defense University. The views expressed here are strictly his own.
