CHINA

China Brings Out the Big Guns for National Day

New hypersonic missile and a stealth combat drone were among the weapons on parade

By Jeremy Page

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Military vehicles carrying the DF-17 hypersonic ballistic missile during a National Day parade on Oct. 1 in Beijing. PHOTO: XINHUA/SHUTTERSTOCK

BEIJING—The sophisticated Chinese weaponry paraded past Tiananmen Square on Tuesday, including a new hypersonic missile and a stealth combat drone, sent a clear message to Washington: In military terms, the U.S.'s technological advantage over China is shrinking fast.

The display, marking the 70th anniversary of Communist Party rule in China, highlighted the People's Liberation Army's growing emphasis on its missile force, as well as on unmanned systems and electronic warfare, defense experts said.

Although primarily designed to show strength for a domestic audience, it also demonstrated how China is increasingly developing and deploying indigenous weaponry on a par with, or in some cases more advanced than, the U.S. and its allies, those experts said.

While China still lags far behind the U.S. in overall firepower and combat experience, it now has a broad range of domestically-produced arms designed to project Chinese power far from its shores and to prevent America and its allies from intervening in a conflict in Asia.

With the U.S. and China now locked in a struggle for technological and geopolitical dominance, Tuesday's parade is likely to intensify calls in the U.S. for tighter controls on transfers to China of technology or expertise with any potential military use.

A senior Chinese military official said last week that all the equipment in the parade is in active service.

Here are some of the highlights:

DF-17 Hypersonic Missile

PHOTO: GREG BAKER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Making its public debut in the parade, the Dongfeng-17, or DF-17, is thought to be China's first operational missile mounted with a hypersonic glide vehicle—capable of flying at more than five times the speed of sound—and the first such weapon deployed anywhere in the world, defense experts said.

Once launched, the missile is designed to release a hypersonic glide vehicle that can cruise at relatively low altitude and speeds above Mach 5, or about 3,400 miles an hour, changing direction if needed. That allows it to evade current missile-defense systems.

"There's simply nothing like it in any Western military force," said Sam Roggeveen, director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute in Sydney. "China is now, in some spheres of military technology, ahead of any Western nation."

He said it was likely designed to be used in the Asia-Pacific region as one of several weapon systems meant to deter the U.S. and its allies from engaging China in conflict there.

The Pentagon has identified hypersonic missiles and systems to defend against them as among its highest priorities, citing development of similar technology by China and Russia. Lockheed Martin Corp. , which has won the largest share of new U.S. hypersonics contracts, expects test flights of its first prototype missiles next year, with potential production in the early 2020s.

DF-41 ICBM

PHOTO: WU HONG/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

The biggest piece of weaponry on display was the Dongfeng-41, or DF-41, a road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missile, whose estimated range of 7,500 miles allows it to conduct a nuclear strike on any part of the U.S.

It can also carry multiple re-entry vehicles, which are designed to evade missile defense systems.

"China's most powerful and advanced nuclear weapons system, the DF-41 has clearly been designed and deployed with deterring the United States in mind," said Andrew Erickson, an expert on the Chinese military at the U.S. Naval War College.

The Pentagon said in an annual report on the Chinese military published this year that Beijing appeared to be considering additional ways to launch the DF-41, including by rail and from silos.

"This system has long been known, but had never been seen," said Ankit Panda, an adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists. "It's China's most responsive and flexible strategic nuclear system, capable of hurling multiple nuclear warheads to the entirety of the United States."

Gongji-11 Stealth Combat Aerial Drone

Also on display for the first time was a stealthy combat aerial drone called the Gongji-11, or GJ-11, which Chinese state media said was the final version of an earlier model known as Sharp Sword.

With a wing design similar to that of an American B-2 strategic bomber, the drone is designed to sneak undetected into enemy-controlled airspace and to fire missiles at targets beyond the reach of manned combat aircraft.

It is also believed to be able to fly much farther, and remain airborne much longer, than jet fighters, and could greatly enhance China's aerial firepower in a potential conflict over the South China Sea, Taiwan or points beyond.

Some experts said they expect it to be used on China's next generation of aircraft carriers.

PHOTO: SHEN HONG/XINHUA/ZUMA PRESS

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"This parade illustrates the PLA's embrace of unmanned operations as critical elements of future combat across all domains of warfare," said Elsa Kania, a research fellow focused on Chinese military innovation at Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology.

She added that the PLA Navy appeared to be planning to deploy the new stealth combat drone on its carriers.

HSU001 Underwater Drone

One highlight of the parade that took many defense experts by surprise was a pair of large unmanned underwater vehicles, or UUVs, that were displayed for the first time.

They weren't identified by name, but had "HSU001" written on their sides and appeared to be mounted with a set of sensors.

That suggested that they could be used to track foreign naval vessels, either to protect Chinese nuclear missile submarines or to monitor other countries' naval operations farther afield.

PHOTO: MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Some experts said they resembled the Orca extra-large UUV, which is being built for the U.S. Navy by Boeing Co.

"The rolling out of this large UUV is significant as only a few major powers have managed such programs," said Collin Koh, research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

He said it could be used for defense or offensive purposes.

"Protection of Chinese strategic sea-based nuclear assets is one such plausible use," he said. "Offensive missions could entail deploying such drones for discreet intelligence gathering close to foreign shores or foreign naval formations in distant waters."

DR-8 Supersonic Aerial Drone

PHOTO: GREG BAKER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The lineup of unmanned aerial vehicles also included a supersonic reconnaissance drone identified by some experts as the DR-8, but sometimes referred to as the Wuzhen-8, or WZ-8.

It is designed to gather intelligence in enemy-controlled airspace, including by assessing damage from China's antiship and other ballistic missiles, defense experts said.

Some experts say the DR-8 resembles a U.S.-made drone called the D-21 that, according to declassified U.S. government records, was used in several failed missions to monitor China's

nuclear program but was retired in 1971.

"The PLA has displayed a range of unmanned systems that are variously stealthy, supersonic, and capable of precision strike," said Ms. Kania of Georgetown University.

They could be used for missions including reconnaissance, electronic countermeasures and assessing battle damage from "carrier killer" antiship ballistic missiles, she said.

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