



## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

# The Real Motives for China's Nuclear Expansion

## Beijing Seeks Geopolitical Leverage More Than Military Advantage

BY TONG ZHAO May 3, 2024

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China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, Beijing is on track to amass 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, up from around 200 in 2019, according to Pentagon estimates. This nuclear buildup, combined with China's broader investments in modernizing its armed forces, has caused deep concern in Washington. In 2023, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States insisted that China's nuclear expansion should prompt U.S. policymakers to "re-evaluate the size and composition of the U.S. nuclear force." In March, Admiral John Aquilino, the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, warned, "we haven't faced a threat like this since World War II."

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As Washington grapples with the severity of the threat and the risk of nuclear confrontation, U.S. policymakers must make an effort to better understand the motivation behind China's actions. Analysts have been puzzled by China's sudden shift away from its traditional policy of maintaining a relatively small nuclear arsenal. Some in Washington believe China's buildup is a reaction to U.S. technological advances; others are concerned that Beijing may have unilaterally adopted a far more aggressive nuclear strategy.

A close assessment of the evolving thinking within China's political leadership and security policy circles reveals that Chinese officials are not simply expanding their nuclear arsenal for military-technical purposes. Rather, Chinese leaders seem to have embraced the untested belief that nuclear weaponry grants them greater geopolitical leverage to counter perceived threats. Beijing's objections to what it sees as an unfair U.S. nuclear strategy and illegitimate U.S. security interests further solidify its willingness to use unilateral measures to address its security concerns. Washington must understand how these underlying perceptions shape Beijing's nuclear policy if it wants to steer the U.S.-Chinese relationship in a more prudent direction—or risk responding on the basis of flawed assumptions, with potentially counterproductive or even catastrophic results.

### PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH?

In Beijing's view, growing tensions with Washington are the result of the shifting balance of power between China and the United States—a consequence of China's rapid economic development rather than any change in behavior on its part. Washington feels threatened by China's rise and has become increasingly hostile to Beijing, the thinking goes, and has developed containment strategies aimed at preserving U.S. geopolitical dominance. Given these circumstances, Beijing must persuade Washington to accept China's ascendance as a major player and convince U.S. policymakers that they will be unable to contain, disrupt, or destabilize China. Beijing can do so only, according to China's ruling elites, by bolstering its power.

This reasoning has led China to perceive a mounting threat from the United States as the gap in power between the two countries has narrowed. A staunch advocate of the notion that the United States is hostile to China's rise, Xi assigns great geopolitical significance to nuclear weapons as a means of showcasing Chinese power. His predecessors, influenced by China's traditionally modest nuclear philosophy and with more limited resources at their disposal, exercised significant restraint in developing China's nuclear capabilities and prioritized qualitative improvements over quantitative expansion. Xi, on the other hand, has elevated the missile force to the status of a full military service, issued specific instructions to expedite nuclear modernization, and boosted both the sophistication and the size of China's nuclear arsenal.

Xi's commitment to nuclear weapons reflects a profound difference in how he perceives such arms as compared with his American counterparts. Rather than aiming to achieve clearly defined military objectives, such as deterring an enemy from undertaking specific military activities, Beijing sees nuclear weapons as symbols of military strength and believes that they wield a particular influence on an adversary's perception of the power balance. This notion underpins what Chinese officials refer to as the "strategic counterbalance" mission of their nuclear forces—a bid to force the United States to take a more accommodating stance toward China.

Xi has long believed in the merits of strategic counterbalancing through nuclear weapons. Shortly after coming to power in 2012, he commented that Russia had made the right decision to prioritize the development of its nuclear capabilities even as the country's economy was in decline. Moscow's move was in line with Xi's view that the strength of a country's nuclear arsenal shapes an adversary's overall approach toward the bilateral relationship. In early 2021, amid internal warnings that a U.S.-led global anti-Chinese campaign following the COVID-19 outbreak could pose the greatest perceived challenge to Beijing's state and regime security in decades, Xi called on the military to further speed up China's nuclear expansion. This emphasis on nuclear weapons as a form of general leverage has taken hold among Chinese strategists, especially given rising tensions with the United States. As Beijing demands better treatment by Washington and rejects any dialogue that would take place from a position of U.S. superiority, Chinese public opinion leaders have contended that a larger nuclear arsenal would force Washington to genuinely respect Beijing and tread more cautiously.

The notion that nuclear weapons possess extensive—almost magical—coercive power in and beyond the military realm is probably more a product of intuition than of rigorously examined logic and evidence. After all, Moscow's formidable nuclear power during the Cold War did not deter Washington from seeking to undermine the Soviet Union through economic subversion and political warfare. Nonetheless, the highly centralized domestic power structure that Xi has established has prevented any serious evaluation of his guiding assumptions, leading instead to the rapid and unquestioning execution of his vision of China as a more robust nuclear power. The government's suppression of what it has labeled "baseless criticisms of the Party's decisions" and the secrecy with which it veils its planning mechanisms and activities make it hard for the Chinese expert community to assess and debate nuclear development, much less weigh in on future policy. The official military doctrine contains increasingly incoherent elements, such as the nuclear forces' emphasis on "war preparation" and "winning strategic victories" alongside a persistent opposition to warfighting, suggesting that nuclear policymaking is a top-down process driven more by a nebulous political mandate than by distinct military necessity and robust methodology. The lack of well-defined and thoroughly examined military objectives impairs China's ability to publicly explain its policy—or to formulate clear positions on the circumstances under which it would be prepared to negotiate nuclear limitations with the United States.

## **FOUL IS FAIR**

A key obstacle to nuclear dialogue is China's growing skepticism that cooperative security measures could defend it from the existential threat that it perceives is coming from the United States. Xi, for instance, has stressed the importance of "keeping the strategic initiative to safeguard national security firmly in our own hands." This distrust is driving Beijing further toward achieving a more advantageous balance of power and diminishes its interest in nuclear restraint, let alone arms control talks.

Beijing's pessimism partly stems from perceived U.S. double standards in the nuclear realm. Chinese experts point to the fact that the U.S. government does not accept that China has the right to adopt the same nuclear strategies as those used by the United States. Washington, for instance, maintains the option for the first use of nuclear weapons but raises concerns over China potentially deviating from its unconditional pledge to not use nuclear weapons first—a commitment that China says it will not break.

U.S. decision-makers explain away these double standards by hinting that American security objectives are more legitimate than China's. They consider the U.S. goal of upholding the territorial status quo in the Asia-Pacific, including in the Taiwan Strait and the East China and South China Seas, as aligned with international laws and norms, and they contrast their regional aims with Chinese efforts to change the territorial status quo through coercive means. Therefore, U.S. policymakers deem it both morally defensible and strategically necessary to preserve a broad range of nuclear options for the United States and its allies.

Beijing, however, attributes these double standards to what Chinese officials describe as the United States' "hegemonic arrogance." In particular, China sees the U.S. claim of the right to defend Taiwan, a territory Beijing has identified as "the core of its core interests," as illegitimate, especially when Washington frames it in terms of its own security needs. American strategists often highlight Taiwan's significance and argue that keeping Taiwan separate from China is critically important to U.S. national security interests, which include maintaining a favorable military balance in the Asia-Pacific, defending U.S. allies in the region, preserving U.S. global credibility, and advancing geoeconomic competition with China. These announced goals give further credence to Beijing's concern that U.S. geopolitical gains will come at the expense of China's territorial integrity. And they erode the moral basis of the U.S. opposition against China's military agenda and strengthen Beijing's conviction that it must challenge what it views as American hegemony.

China believes it can rectify this unjust imbalance by more ambitiously showcasing its power, including by expanding its nuclear arsenal. Chinese experts argue, for instance, that the Soviet Union succeeded in altering U.S. nuclear strategy during the Cold War. By significantly enhancing its nuclear capabilities during the 1960s and 1970s, Moscow managed to pressure Washington into abandoning its policy of massive retaliation, which threatened a large-scale nuclear strike in response to any act of Soviet aggression, in favor of the more restrained strategy of flexible response, which made the level and scale of U.S. nuclear responses commensurate with the severity of the Soviet aggression. They are also quick to point out that Washington did not correspondingly adjust its policies toward weaker adversaries, such as China, but instead maintained expansive strike plans against them. Now that China has significantly more resources than it did during the Cold War, Beijing seeks to redress what it perceives as an ongoing injustice.

This resistance underscores a broader theme in the U.S.-Chinese rivalry: beyond divergences over specific security objectives, China increasingly demands fair rules and equal standards of conduct as an end in and of itself. Chinese officials have also emphasized the importance of fairness as an essential condition for engaging in discussions on security and arms control matters. This motive suggests that China is likely to continue focusing on unilateral capability development, rather than cooperative measures, to establish what it considers a more just and equitable nuclear relationship with the United States.

### **THE UNDERLYING CHALLENGES**

These nontechnical factors introduce obstacles to nuclear dialogue that are complex and poorly understood by observers outside China. American analysts and others in the West continue to narrowly fixate on the military-technical factors that have shaped China's nuclear strategy in the past to explain the country's current nuclear expansion. To be sure, Chinese strategists have expressed concerns for decades that U.S. homeland missile defenses, conventional precision strike weapons, and other nonnuclear technologies would make it more difficult for China to retaliate if it endured a nuclear first strike. But the United States has not significantly expanded its nuclear forces, conventional missile

stockpiles, or homeland missile defense systems in recent years, suggesting that additional factors lie behind Xi's decision to embrace nuclear expansion.

Most foreign analysts and policymakers fail to appreciate the extent to which China's nuclear expansion is motivated by ambiguous political reasoning and muddled thinking and instead interpret it as being driven by an offensive military strategy. Drawing on worst-case nuclear warfighting scenarios, including a possible coordinated preemptive nuclear strike by China and Russia against the United States, many experts argue that the United States must build up its nuclear forces and defenses. These experts, aiming to strengthen U.S. deterrence for understandable reasons, overlook the possibility that their arguments might actually undermine U.S. security by giving further credence to the hawkish view in Beijing that Washington is intentionally overstating the threat posed by China to justify its pursuit of absolute nuclear superiority.

The situation is made worse by the growing chasm between Chinese and American societies. The widening gap in worldviews and political perceptions between China and the West, facilitated in large part by China's control of information and public opinion, is a major obstacle to achieving mutual understanding and trust. As a result, both sides have little faith that cooperative approaches will ensure future security. Beijing is hoping it can skirt the issue with the help of a larger nuclear stockpile. Aided by an expanded arsenal, China believes it can force Washington to overlook the fundamental differences between them, including escalating disputes over facts, norms, and values, and simply compel the United States to accept China as it is, respecting China's core interests as defined by Beijing. If China stays this course, however, it will end up in an intensifying nuclear rivalry with the United States.

#### **BRIDGING THE PERCEPTION GAP**

The current U.S. approach to China's nuclear program is ineffective. Proposals made by American analysts for de-escalating the arms race typically call for mutual restraint at the military-technical level through measures that enhance nuclear transparency or limit new strategic weapons. But these suggestions do not directly tackle the underlying concerns and grievances that drive China's nuclear buildup, and unsurprisingly, they have failed to interest Xi. Ultimately, stabilizing the nascent U.S.-Chinese nuclear arms race requires that Beijing and Washington engage in direct discussions on the key security issues that fuel their mutual hostility.

Such a dialogue aligns fully with both U.S. and Chinese objectives. The so-called rules-based international order championed by Washington relies on a mutual recognition of what constitutes legitimate interests and the acceptable means to pursue them. Meanwhile, in high-level government statements and recent documents, Chinese officials have repeatedly emphasized the importance of "taking into account the legitimate security interests of other countries" and ensuring "undiminished security for all countries." The overlap in the two countries' positions creates an opportunity for a thorough discussion to define legitimate security interests and the acceptable means to achieve them. It would also mirror the process leading up to the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which effectively reduced tensions between the Soviet and Western blocs during the Cold War.

As an initial step, China and the United States could commit to not change the territorial status quo in the Asia-Pacific through military means. Such an agreement, or reciprocal unilateral declarations to the same end, would greatly bolster the credibility of China's claims to be rising peacefully, help set fair and equitable rules of conduct, foster a shared vision for regional stability, and reduce all involved parties' motivations for military buildup.

Admittedly, given China's ongoing reluctance to enter meaningful discussions on both nuclear and broader security issues, there is no guarantee that Beijing would immediately welcome a U.S. proposal for talks. Even if a dialogue were to begin—potentially prompted by international appeal and pressure—it would still require adept diplomacy to steer both parties through what would likely be challenging conversations. Nonetheless, a dialogue-based approach aimed at better understanding each other's views on what constitutes legitimate security interests and approaches would address Beijing's

core concerns and offer the prospect of stabilizing the U.S.-Chinese security relationship. By prioritizing this discussion, Washington could demonstrate its goodwill—and help Beijing recognize that only cooperative measures will soften a U.S. policy of deterrence.

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