

China's Nuclear Expansion: Why Does It Matter and What the U.S. Should Do About It

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This paper was originally written in September 2024 as coursework for National War College. The assignment's objective was for students to write a strategy paper on how the United States should "[deal] with the most significant and important threat posed by Russia or China." Students were instructed to use the elements of Strategic Logic found in National War College's Primer to propose a national security strategy.¹ For the paper length requirements and purpose of the assignment, the first four elements of strategic logic were emphasized (analyzing the strategic situation, defining the desired ends, identifying and or developing means, and designing the ways), while the final element (assessing the cost, risks, and results) was not included. This paper does not reflect the views of the National War College or National Defense University.

The United States has a vital national interest in countering the People's Republic of China's (PRC) rapid nuclear expansion because China can use these weapons to threaten U.S. power projection in the Indo-Pacific, counter U.S. extended deterrence commitments in the region, and upset the larger world order. This strategy paper recommends addressing China's nuclear threat by maintaining U.S. superiority over China in the nuclear realm and enhancing security relationships between the United States and allies and partners in the region. In doing so, the United States assures allies and partners worldwide that the U.S. Government will do what it takes "to outmaneuver our geopolitical competitors, tackle shared challenges, and set our world firmly on a path toward a brighter future and more hopeful tomorrow."²

Analyze the Situation

CONTEXT:

Xi Jinping has intensified China's use of economic leverage and military coercion in its engagement with the rest of the world in hopes of achieving the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049.³ The U.S.

Department of Defense (DOD) recognizes that "the PRC's strategy [of] deliberate and determined efforts to amass, improve, and harness the internal and external elements of national power will place the PRC 'in a leading position' in an enduring competition between systems."⁴ Xi Jinping targets the international system, blaming it for suppressing China's development, explaining in March 2023 that "Western countries led by the United States have implemented comprehensive containment, encirclement and suppression against us."⁵ The PRC's rapid nuclear expansion is the ultimate example of Xi's quest to place the PRC in a leading position, and the enduring competition is targeted against the United States. A robust nuclear deterrent would allow the PRC to elevate coercive military measures and counter-balance U.S. nuclear forces in the region. Counter-balancing would be a significant departure from China's previous nuclear posture and policy and demonstrate Xi Jinping's commitment to establishing a leading position.

The PRC practiced a minimum nuclear deterrence strategy since becoming a nuclear weapon state in the 1960s, with minimum deterrence strategy arguing that a small but secure nuclear arsenal can survive a first strike and still impose unacceptable damage

to an aggressor.⁶ Additionally, for decades the PRC's nuclear modernization efforts only amounted to guaranteeing that Chinese nuclear weapons could deliver a response after an adversary's initial strike.⁷ The static warhead number, combined with the PRC's modest nuclear improvements, assured nuclear experts that the PRC still embraced its "no first use" policy.⁸

But in the last five years, the PRC's nuclear posture has changed significantly, with DOD estimates of PRC's operational warhead numbers doubling from the low-200s in 2020 to 500 as of May 2023.⁹ This is an unprecedented departure from previous minimum deterrence warhead number estimates, but the PRC continues to maintain its "no first use" policy. In May 2024 U.S. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Bonnie Jenkins expressed this lack of congruence between policy and posture, noting, "Our questions are, quite frankly, how does an idea for no-first-use really fit within their ongoing process of building up nuclear weapons? And how sincere are they...?"¹⁰ And 2023 DOD estimates project the PRC's operational warheads to number over 1000 by 2030, "much of which will be deployed at higher readiness levels" that will "outpace potential developments by the nuclear forces of any competitor."¹¹

Why do numbers matter? Matthew Kroenig's 'superiority-brinkmanship synthesis theory' best describes why: "A robust nuclear posture reduces a state's expected cost of war, increasing its resolve to international political disputes, and thus providing it with a coercive advantage over states more vulnerable to a nuclear exchange."¹² He further details, "When potential conflicts of interest emerge, nuclear inferior opponents are less likely to initiate a military challenge and more likely to back down if the crisis escalates."¹³ Kroenig's theory explains the rapid increase of the PRC's highly enriched uranium output and the number of nuclear warheads: China no longer wants to be the lesser nuclear power being pushed around. Taken together with Xi Jinping's declarations and China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, one would expect that China will use nuclear coercion to achieve its goals once the PRC has amassed enough nuclear warheads to make Washington blink.

Yet China's warhead numbers are not the United States' only problem: on February 4, 2022, the PRC and the Russian Federation issued a joint statement that proclaimed "friendship between the two States has no limits, [and] there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation."¹⁴ Russia and the PRC have already cooperated in joint exercises with their strategic nuclear bombers,

most recently flying two Chinese and two Russian bombers near Alaska in July 2024.¹⁵ If such cooperation continues, the PRC and the Russian Federation could pose a combined nuclear threat against the United States, its allies, and partners. The U.S. Strategic Posture Commission considered this and concluded that the U.S. nuclear posture must change to defend its vital interest and "address the threats from these two nuclear-armed adversaries arising during the 2027-2035 timeframe."¹⁶ The urgency couldn't be greater, and the Commission's recommendations are a significant divergence from our arms control-minded recent past.

Since the U.S.'s final nuclear buildup in the 1980s and the subsequent end of the Cold War, nuclear arms control and the reduction of nuclear weapon numbers have been a critical part of U.S. National Security Strategy. But to quote a speaker at a NATO event in March 2024, "Arms control, as we know it, is dead."¹⁷ Historically, The PRC avoided nuclear arms control discussions with the United States due to the large disparity between total warhead numbers.¹⁸ But recently, the PRC proceeded with strategic risk reduction talks with a U.S. Department of State (DOS) led delegation, only to halt talks in July 2024 because of the U.S.'s arms sales to Taiwan.¹⁹ Recently, the world remained hopeful as the five nuclear weapon states (nicknamed the P5) met in January 2022 and issued a joint statement "[Affirming] that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."²⁰ But less than two months later, Putin invaded Ukraine and utilized nuclear rhetoric to make the West reconsider military support to Ukraine. Meanwhile, China continued to increase its nuclear warhead numbers and expand its nuclear capabilities. The nuclear actions of the PRC and Russia following the P5 joint resolution bring into question the sincerity of both the PRC and Russia. Their collusion exacerbates the problem and indicates that the United States, with allies and partners, should try something different to bring them to the arms control negotiation table.

Like arms control, U.S. nuclear weapons have also played a critical role in U.S. National Security Strategy. The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) cites three roles within the national defense strategy: to deter strategic attacks, to assure Allies and partners, and to achieve U.S. objectives if deterrence fails.²¹ The 2022 NPR notes that the U.S. global alliance and partnership network is a military center of gravity and that U.S. extended deterrence is foundational to this network.²² It further notes "assuring Allies and partners that these commitments are credible is central to U.S. national security and defense strategy."²³ Therefore,

should China demonstrate any advantage in nuclear capabilities over the United States through nuclear coercion, preventing the United States from projecting power in support of Indo-Pacific allies and partners, it would chisel away at the extended deterrence commitments the United States has made worldwide. It is through this lens that the PRC's rapid nuclear buildup threatens a U.S. vital national interest.

DOMESTIC CONTEXT:

Several U.S. Government reports call for the United States to take action now. The U.S. National Security Strategy named the PRC as the only competitor with both the intent and the power to reshape the international order.²⁴ As noted previously, the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission's 2023 report to Congress recommends that "U.S. strategy should no longer treat China's nuclear force as a "lesser included" threat."²⁵ The Commission recommends that the U.S. strategic force posture should be modified to address a growing Chinese nuclear threat and that the U.S. theater nuclear force posture should be *urgently* modified to "address the need for U.S. nuclear forces deployed or based in the Asia-Pacific theater."²⁶ Heeding that urgency, the U.S. national security community continues to consider the Commission's numerous recommendations over the past year.²⁷

In considering options to counter the nuclear actions of Russia and China, it is noteworthy that the New START Treaty restriction of 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads expires in February 2026, among the other treaty restrictions.²⁸ Also, U.S. Congress is making noteworthy moves. Congress recently approved full funding of the first new nuclear capability in a generation: the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act directed the sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) to reach initial operational capacity, and the executive branch is moving program implementation forward.²⁹ And while there are programmatic setbacks to dwell upon, U.S. Congress previously approved funding for modernizing every deployed U.S. nuclear capability. Therefore, there is a replacement weapon system or delivery system that maintains these same U.S. capabilities into the future, as well as adding the SLCM-N.³⁰ This is a good place for the United States and allies to start.

KEY ASSUMPTIONS:

- The PRC agrees with the logic of strategic nuclear superiority and will continue to develop

nuclear warheads until they reach numerical parity with U.S. and Russian deployed strategic nuclear warheads (nominally at 1,550).

- The PRC will change its "no first use" policy in the future and resort to nuclear coercion against the United States, its allies, and partners.
- Even with potential budget constraints, the U.S. Congress will support the development of additional nuclear capabilities to counter the PRC's threat.
- Indo-Pacific allies and partners will support the U.S. proposals to deter China in the region.

PROBLEM STATEMENT:

The PRC's rapid nuclear expansion threatens U.S. power projection in the Indo-Pacific region because China can use these weapons to counter U.S. extended deterrence commitments in the region and upset the larger world order.

Define ENDS to Protect or Further Interests

POLITICAL AIM:

The PRC must remain deterred and reconsider their nuclear expansion: they must believe the United States will do what it takes to maintain strategic superiority and, therefore, the PRC cannot gain strategic superiority over the United States.

PRIORITY OBJECTIVES (POS):

PO 1: Increase the U.S. nuclear deterrence posture focused on the Indo-Pacific region that assures U.S. allies and backstops U.S. power projection by 2027.³¹

PO 2: Strengthen Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships to deter and defend against coercive PRC actions by 2030, preventing PRC hegemony in the region.³²

PO 3: Enhance individual allies' and partners' capabilities to deter and defend against the PLA's military capabilities by 2033.³³

NEGATIVE OBJECTIVES TO BE AVOIDED:

Escalation to nuclear war must be avoided. The United States must maintain open and transparent communications about the intent of extended deterrence actions and commitments in the region. The same transparency must be utilized in messaging developments/infrastructure builds within the nuclear weapons complex.

THEORY OF SUCCESS:

This strategy calls for bold actions not seen since the 1980s to convince the PRC that any action taken to achieve strategic superiority will be countered by a U.S. action. And yet, this strategy recommends a tempered approach of only using nuclear technologies we already possess. Yes, one solution could be to 'make more nuclear weapons,' but this strategy's military solutions are more cost-effective as they recommend the United States takes full advantage of the technologies and warheads on hand now. Successful messaging to Congress and other stakeholders should highlight that this strategy is about the efficient use of capabilities and weapons already funded, something they should appreciate.

In fact, this strategy does not advocate going above the U.S. nuclear stockpile total number of 3,748 nuclear warheads, a note that the arms control community should appreciate.³⁴ But deploying more nuclear weapons and increasing capabilities is significant, something the United States has not done since the 1980s. And because it has been 40 years since the United States has taken such drastic actions, the PRC will receive the message: the United States will do what it takes to maintain strategic superiority, and the PRC cannot outmatch U.S. nuclear capabilities.

Determine MEANS and formulate WAYS to achieve ENDS

Note: The author is using the DIME model of categorizing instruments of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—to support assigning the action (WAYS) to the U.S. Government actor (MEANS).

PRIORITY OBJECTIVE 1:

Increase the U.S. nuclear deterrence posture focused on the Indo-Pacific region that assures U.S. allies and backstops U.S. power projection by 2027.

Priority Objective (PO)1, Sub-Objective (SO)1:

Military: DOD must plan to add more warheads to our current intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). In February 2026, the United States is no longer constrained by New START numbers and possesses the non-deployed warheads already. Following February 2026, DOD should add these warheads to the Minuteman III missiles within our missile fields and Trident II missiles deployed in the Pacific. Considering the United States removed warheads from Tridents and Minutemans to achieve compliance with the New START treaty, this is a realistic way to provide more capabilities to military planners. This will also support the Strategic Posture Commission's recommendation to address the larger number of targets due to the growing Chinese nuclear threat.³⁵

PO1 SO2: Military: The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) must continue with all weapons programs, and military services must continue with the modernization of each leg of the nuclear triad. This ensures the backbone of U.S. extended deterrence remains intact and ensures the stored U.S. nuclear stockpile weapons could be available to DOD, if directed. It also maintains all current U.S. nuclear capabilities as the Strategic Posture Commission recommends.³⁶

PO1 SO3: Military: As the newest theater nuclear capabilities, the DOD must direct the U.S. Air Force (USAF) to train CONUS-based and Indo-Pacific-based F-35A fighter-bomber wings to carry non-strategic nuclear weapons dedicated to Indo-Pacific deployment, once available. Like Europe-based units, these would be dual-capable aircraft ready to execute conventional missions and the nuclear mission. The U.S. aircraft variant is already certified to carry the B61-12 nuclear gravity bomb.³⁷ F-35As utilize stealth technology and would significantly expand the number of delivery systems in the theater: adversaries cannot be convinced they eliminated the nuclear threat when targeting these fighters. The USAF wings must be trained to be nuclear-capable, and the individual jets must be certified, but the most expensive items (nuclear weapons, jets, and pilots) are resourced. This proposal is a significant theater nuclear posture change. It would send a clear message to the PRC and Indo-Pacific partners that the United States will fulfill its extended deterrence commitments in the face of PRC nuclear expansion.

PO1 SO4: Military: Over the long term, "The NNSA's strategic infrastructure must be expanded to have sufficient capability to accommodate meeting current

nuclear modernization programs in time to meet the two-peer threat and to respond to emerging requirements in a timely fashion.”³⁸ This ‘way’ could be considered strictly ‘military’ in nature, but the expansion of NNSA contracts, infrastructure building, and job opportunities would also boost local economies. Though not projecting power outward, DOD and NNSA must consider the ‘informational’ aspect in persuading Congress that expansion would be economically worthwhile to their constituents.

PO1 SO5: Diplomatic: The State Department must reengage the PRC in strategic stability discussions, messaging U.S. intentions to meet the PRC’s rapid nuclear expansion with a U.S. expansion of nuclear capabilities. DOS must be provided the latitude to give the PRC sufficient information to communicate how U.S. expansion will negate the PRC’s nuclear buildup, even if the PRC’s nuclear capabilities are coupled with Russia’s against the United States. These diplomatic engagements must happen after the DOD begins their ‘ways’ of PO1 to demonstrate that the U.S. is engaging from a position of strength.

PRIORITY OBJECTIVE 2:

Strengthen Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships to deter and defend against coercive PRC actions by 2030, preventing PRC hegemony in the region.

PO2 SO1: Information: To begin this priority objective, the United States Intelligence Community (IC) must provide intelligence and information to explain the perceived nature of the PRC to allies and partners in the region. Being the original nuclear weapons state, the United States has decades of technical experience to reverse-engineer the PRC’s nuclear buildup activity and explain the PRC’s true intent to regional allies and partners. Armed with information against the PRC, this IC effort will help support the U.S. narrative and negate the PRC’s narrative. With concessions discussed in PO2 SO4, this is intended to persuade regional allies and partners of the necessity for U.S. coalition efforts in the region.

The United States has effectively done this in the past. In *Victory*, Peter Schweizer writes of Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Casey flying across the world to visit his counterparts and provide overhead imagery of Soviet activities, effectively using information to convince partners to support U.S. strategy.³⁹ And recently, the Biden Administration’s sharing of intelligence of Russia’s staging actions

along the Ukrainian border gave Ukraine more time to defend itself, and motivated allies and partners to support Ukraine and reject Russian disinformation.⁴⁰ The United States must do the same in this scenario.

PO2 SO2: Diplomatic: Following IC revelations, the State Department/DOD must engage with regional allies and partners to find common security interests against the PRC and other regional malign actors, such as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). With information against the PRC, the State Department could persuade regional partners on the necessity of declarations or agreements to begin the formation of a defensive coalition to prevent Chinese hegemony in the region. As described in Elbridge Colby’s *The Strategy of Denial*, a coalition countering the PRC would be intended to balance the regional power, preventing PRC hegemony in the region where military-economic strength is clustered.⁴¹ The newly formed U.S.-Republic of Korea’s Nuclear Consultative Group is an example of a venue used to consult with and assure an Ally of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence commitments, promoting peace and stability in the region.⁴² Another venue primed for this coalition conversation is the Quad discussion format between Australia, Japan, India, and the United States.⁴³ Opportunities to expand these venues’ scope and scale to other regional partners should be considered.

PO3 SO3: Military: DOD and USINDOPACOM must develop an exercise schedule with regional allies and partners that deter and defend against PRC military activities in the area. This is a force-enabling activity that demonstrates defensive capabilities and enhances the credibility of a regional defense network. If nuclear-capable F-35As were introduced to the region, exercises incorporating these jets with regional forces would further enhance regional defense credibility.

Regarding U.S. strategic nuclear forces, further use of the U.S. bomber task force in the region and port calls of Ohio-class submarines are ways for allies to demonstrate support for U.S. extended deterrence and projects U.S. nuclear capabilities in ways the PRC and Russia cannot.

PO2 SO4: Economic: The State Department/Department of Treasury must incentivize allies and partners to use export controls and sanctions against the PRC and promote economic ties with the United States and regional allies and partners. The Biden Administration’s use of export controls restricting China’s ability to obtain advanced technologies such as semiconductors, and creating the Non-Specially



ABOVE: From left to right: Maj. Gen. Ash Collingburn, 1st Australian Division commanding general, Lt. Gen. Toshikazu Yamane, Ground Component Command commanding general, and U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Joel B. Vowell, U.S. Army Pacific Command deputy commanding general, shake hands during the opening ceremony of Yama Sakura 87 opening ceremony at Camp Asaka, Japan, Dec. 6, 2024. The three military leaders spoke to the importance of lasting partnership and collective commitment to peace and stability within the Indo-Pacific region during the ceremony. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Michael Graf)

Designated National Chinese Military-Industrial Complex List to place financial sanctions on companies involved in China's defense and surveillance technology sectors are excellent examples that must be upheld.⁴⁴ Particular focus should be on preventing shell companies from getting around export controls and financial sanctions. Sharing causal network links amongst allies could help disrupt malign actors from avoiding these export controls and sanctions.

hegemony. An excellent example in the Indo-Pacific region is the Australia-United Kingdom-United States submarine partnership, AUKUS. In providing the technology for Australia to acquire nuclear-capable submarines, AUKUS "[ensures] cooperation in developing and providing advanced capabilities to promote security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region."⁴⁵

Conclusion

PRIORITY OBJECTIVE 3:

Enhance individual allies' and partners' capabilities to deter and defend against the PLA's military capabilities by 2033.

PO3 SO1: Information: First, the IC must share intelligence tools such as net assessments with regional allies and partners to inform them of the military threat posed by the PRC and compare how their individual militaries compare to the PRC's capabilities.

PO3 SO2: Military: Then, DOD/DOS must authorize more foreign military sales to these allies and partners. This will increase individual allies' and partners' resilience against PRC aggression and support the larger region's standing against the PRC's regional

To "outmaneuver our geopolitical competitors," the United States must consider countering the People's Republic of China's (PRC) rapid nuclear expansion as a vital national interest. The PRC's aggressive actions in the South China Sea against U.S. allies and partners are premonitions of what will happen if the PRC achieves strategic nuclear superiority over the United States. This strategy paper presents a cost-effective approach to addressing China's nuclear threat and maintaining U.S. superiority over China in the nuclear realm, and enhancing security relationships between the United States and allies and partners in the region. In doing so, the United States will assure allies and partners worldwide that the U.S. Government will do what it takes to "set our world firmly on a path toward a brighter future and more hopeful tomorrow."⁴⁶ ■

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