

The Domestic Politics Behind China's Strategic Force Improvements

Nicola Leveringhaus

China's nuclear expansion is occurring at a time of major domestic political change, with implications for its nuclear weapons strategy. Domestic changes of note include defense reforms, a contraction and politicization of China's strategic community, as well as sustained top-down interest in commemoration of China's nuclear weapons past, such as the "Two Bombs, One Satellite" program. These domestic political changes represent an unprecedented elevation of the national, social, and political value of China's nuclear weapons by the CCP in the Xi era. How should others in the region and beyond best respond to these changes? The article ends with some thoughts on foreign state engagement with China as Beijing expands and elevates the domestic importance of its nuclear arsenal.

China's strategic force is undergoing vast and unprecedented levels of improvement. There is a compelling explanation for this: Chinese military modernization, which spans decades, now yields visible results, bolstering national strategic deterrence. Xi Jinping, the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader, today commands the most powerful military since the People's Republic of China was established in 1949.¹ Chinese strategic capabilities have become more accurate, mobile, and diverse across the air, sea, land, space, and cyber domains than ever before. These strategic assets include an estimated 600 nuclear warheads; vast numbers of intermediate-range conventional missiles, including the DF-26, which has dual-use / "hot swappable" warhead

functions; an emerging operational nuclear mission for bombers; and since 2020, the world's largest navy, which includes six Jin-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs).²

China's strategic force improvements are happening in real time and constitute an unsettling new technological reality for the US and its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, since 2024 the US frames China as part of a "multiple nuclear challenger problem,"³ an alteration to the "two-nuclear-peer" framing in 2023 that pitted China alongside Russia, with newer predictions that China might have at least 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030 and 1,500 by 2035.⁴ Excellent scholarly literature explains recent changes in Chinese nuclear capabilities in relation to United States capabilities, specifically how US strat-

1 Fiona A. Cunningham's recent book, *Under the Nuclear Shadow: China's Information-Age Weapons in International Security* (Princeton University Press, 2025) is excellent on the history of these developments. See also M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros, "China's Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure," *International Security* 35, no. 2 (2010): 48–87.

2 Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, "Chinese Nuclear Weapons 2025," *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 81, no. 2 (2025): 135–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2467011>.

3 "Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies," remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Dr. Vipin Narang at CSIS, August 1, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3858311/nuclear-threats-and-the-role-of-allies-remarks-by-acting-assistant-secretary-of/>.

4 Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's Center for Global Security Research (CGSR), "China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: Implications for US Nuclear Deterrence Strategy," 2023, https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR_Two_Peer_230314.pdf.

egy might be unintentionally fueling China's nuclear expansion, suggesting that a dangerous entangled security dilemma dynamic is emerging between the states.⁵ Yet much less literature discusses wider domestic political changes and how these shape Chinese nuclear thinking today.⁶

Evolving Chinese Strategic Capabilities

In the last five to six years, Chinese strategic forces have become much more mobile, precise, and diverse in their operationality in at least three areas.⁷ First, China now has sea-based nuclear deterrent capabilities, having deployed (since 2015) six Jin-class SSBNs with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) to the South China Sea. External estimates suggest that China seeks around ten SSBNs in total, with improved anti-detection capabilities (making the SSBNs quieter) as well as heightened readiness through a desired continuous-at-sea ability. This Chinese effort reflects a wider push among states in the Indo-Pacific to secure deterrence at sea: North Korea, India, and Pakistan are all developing—to varying degrees of success—SSBNs.

A second advancement relates to intermediate missiles like the DF-26, which are within range of Northeast Asia as well as India and Guam. The warheads on these missiles can be changed quickly from a conventional to a nuclear role, hence the “hot-swappable” element. While this element allows greater flexibility in response to an attack,⁸ analysts worry that it could confuse the enemy and lead to inadvertent escalation in a crisis.⁹

A third advancement relates to new missile silo bases for longer-range intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) like the DF-41. The three new Chinese

silo bases were identified using commercial satellite imagery in 2021.¹⁰ These sites are situated in northern China, specifically Jilantai in Inner Mongolia, the northwestern city of Yumen, and Hami, near Yumen. Chinese officials continue to deny that these sites are silo bases, labeling them windmills instead. Silo bases are important to survivability because they harden and protect missiles from an incoming strike; if these silo fields were to be filled, they could in total house over 300 ICBMs, such as the DF-41, which could reach the continental US.

Today these technical developments give the CCP leadership more strategic options than ever before, including for doctrinal transformation should Beijing desire such change in the future. It remains unclear whether these new capabilities translate into a transformative shift away from assured retaliation and China's declared “no first use” (NFU) pledge.¹¹ It is therefore useful to look beyond technical changes to political indicators to interpret China's changing approach to nuclear weapons.

Domestic Politics and Nuclear Weapons in China

Within the last decade, the Chinese leadership has centralized control over foreign and security policy initiatives and debates, with important effects on Chinese nuclear policy and strategy. First, the CCP has elevated the national social and political value of its nuclear weapons to an unprecedented degree, precisely at a time when China's capabilities and options are expanding rapidly. Second, China's domestic nuclear expert community has contracted, with fewer senior nuclear strategy experts debating and shaping nuclear policy and strategy in China.

5 Henrik Stålhane Hiim, M. Taylor Fravel and Magnus Langset Trøan, “The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma: China's Changing Nuclear Posture,” *International Security* 47, no. 4 (2023): 147–87, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00457. See also David Logan and Phillip C. Saunders, “Discerning the Drivers of China's Nuclear Force Development: Models, Indicators, and Data, National Defense University,” July 2023, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/3471053/discerning-the-drivers-of-chinas-nuclear-force-development-models-indicators-an/>, which provides a very detailed and excellent discussion of different models China might be considering for its future nuclear strategy.

6 An exception to this is a report published after the first draft of this article by Tong Zhao, “Political Drivers of China's Changing Nuclear Policy: Implications for US-China Nuclear Relations and International Security,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2024, 21–23, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/china-nuclear-buildup-political-drivers-united-states-relationship-international-security?lang=en>. This report focuses in on the China-US relationship but also highlights a diminishing role for Chinese nuclear experts, as this article also argues.

7 Nicola Leveringhaus, “Chinese Nuclear Force Modernization and Doctrinal Change,” IFRI, August 2022, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/briefings-de-lifri/chinese-nuclear-modernization-and-doctrinal-change>.

8 Andrew S. Erickson, “Academy of Military Science Researchers: Why We Had to Develop the Dongfeng-26 Ballistic Missile,” December 5, 2015, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2015/12/academy-of-military-science-researchers-why-we-had-to-develop-the-dongfeng-26-ballistic-missile-bilingual-text-analysis-links/>.

9 James M. Acton, “Escalation Through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War,” *International Security* 43, no. 1 (2018): 65.

10 Hans Kristensen, “China's Expanding Missile Training Area: More Silos, Tunnels, and Support Facilities,” Federation of American Scientists, fas.org; Jeffrey Lewis and Decker Everleth, reported in https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-nuclear-missile-silos/2021/06/30/0fa8debc-d9c2-11eb-bb9e-70fda8c37057_story.html; Matt Korda and Hans Kristensen, “China Is Building a Second Nuclear Missile Silo Field,” Federation of American Scientists, fas.org.

11 David Logan and Phillip C. Saunders, “Discerning the Drivers of China's Nuclear Force Development: Models, Indicators, and Data, National Defense University,” July 2023, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/3471053/discerning-the-drivers-of-chinas-nuclear-force-development-models-indicators-an/>.



The public elevation of nuclear weapons in China today is evident in CCP commemoration of its own strategic weapons history, which focuses on the Two Bombs, One Satellite program [两 一星, liang dan yi xing] that resulted in three major scientific achievements: China's atomic test in 1964, its hydrogen test in 1967, and a satellite launch in 1970.¹² Another focus for commemoration is the Third Line / Front [三线, Sanxian], a massive industrial and civil defense project from the Mao era that moved strategic assets and defense industries away from vulnerable coastal and city areas inwards into mountainous and inaccessible areas to ensure survivability in the event of major war.¹³ China actively draws on both past events, invoking the "spirit" [精神, jing shen] of the Two Bombs, One Satellite and Third Line programs to incentivize ordinary Chinese citizens and scientists working in strategic sectors in China (from high-speed rail to space).

This commemoration comes at a time when Xi has also openly reinforced the present-day value of China's strategic weapons with a stated aim in 2022 to build "a strong system of strategic deterrence."¹⁴ Earlier closed-door speeches by Xi in 2012 and 2014 to China's People's Liberation Army Rocket Forces (PLARF, then named the Second Artillery) reportedly reinforce how important the force is to both China's security as well as its national rejuvenation as a great power.¹⁵ Xi has also made clearer in public statements where the CCP sits in the nuclear decision-making process, reaffirming that the Party's Central Military Commission (CMC) and Standing Politburo make the ultimate decision for any use (or threat of use) of strategic weapons, hence the party mantra that "the CMC leads, the theatre commands fight, and the services equip."¹⁶

The anti-corruption campaign has also reinforced centralization. In 2023, under the banner of the anti-corruption campaign, former PLARF commander Li Yuchao and his deputies Liu Guangbin and Zhang

Zhenzhong, as well as another former commander of the Rocket Force at the CCP National Congress, General Zhou Yaning, were removed from power. Corruption is broadly defined, from practical concerns over the purchase of substandard technology and faulty operation of weaponry like missiles, to fears around external leaks of information and disloyalty to the Party. The Party has also sought to increase control through political education campaigns within the PLA.¹⁷ These individual high-profile expulsions and political education campaigns speak to domestic efforts to centralize and purge strategic military bureaucracies from corruption and shore up a deeper sense of loyalty to the Party.¹⁸

Defense reforms also occurred in 2015 and 2024, expanding the operational mission mandate and force status of China's nuclear deterrents, especially its missiles.¹⁹ The first of these reforms, in December 2015, elevated the status of China's land-based strategic nuclear and conventional forces, renaming them as the PLARF. This change can be understood as part of a wider effort to elevate the public status of these forces in domestic politics and their role as important markers of great power. Indeed, from 2017 onwards, Xi Jinping started to talk much more openly about his ambition for China to possess a top-tier world-class military, in which possession of a credible strategic arsenal would be key.²⁰ In the April 2024 reforms, China established four new "arms" (Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, Information Support Force, and Joint Logistics Support Force) to support the four services (PLA, PLAAF, PLAN, and PLARF).

Amid these reforms, Xi has spoken of an enlarged operational mission for the PLARF. Traditionally, the PLARF has been tasked to focus on retaliatory missions, namely counterattack (striking after the enemy has struck [后发制人, houfa zhiren]). Yet recent reporting in China suggests that new declared roles

12 Nicola Leveringhaus, "The Politics of Nuclear Commemoration in Asia: The China Case," ANU Coral Bell School, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6o-TM-exUM>.

13 Paul Kendall and Covell Meyskens, "Afterlives of the Third Front," *The China Quarterly* 260 (2024): 867–71.

14 "Xi Jinping Proposed to Achieve the Centenary Goal of the Founding of the Army and Create a New Situation in the Modernization of National Defense and the Army," October 16, 2022, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/16/content_5718831.htm.

15 "China Unveils Most Advanced Dongfeng-41 Intercontinental Strategic Nuclear Missiles," *China Military*, 2019, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/9642096.html.

16 Research Institute of Party History and Documentation of the CPC Central Committee, *Xi Jinping on the Holistic Approach to National Security* (Central Party Literature Press, 2018), <http://en.qstheory.cn/HolisticApproachtoNationalSecurity.html>.

17 经党中央 委主席 近平批准 中央 委印发《于构建新 代人民 思想政治教育体系的意见》[With the approval of Xi Jinping, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, the Central Military Commission issued the "Opinions on Constructing the Ideological and Political Education System of the People's Army in the New Era"], April 7, 2021, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0407/c1001-32072091.html>.

18 US scholarship on the role of military reforms for Party centralization includes excellent work such as Phillip C. Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (US National Defense University, 2019), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/Chairman-Xi/Chairman-Xi.pdf>.

19 The latest defense white paper and strategic guidelines [军事战略方针, junshi zhanlue fangzhen] were in 2019.

20 Xi Jinping, "决胜全面建成小康社会夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利—在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告 [Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era; hereafter "Work Report"]," October 18, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

have been recently added to the PLARF beyond counterattack, including “counter-balancing” and “winning wars.”²¹ Strategic counterbalancing seems to reflect a geopolitical rather than technically driven assessment in Beijing that, in an increasingly hostile and difficult external security environment, more weapons would have a stabilizing effect between China and its main competitors.²² Less is known from open-source information about whether “winning wars” includes using nuclear missions as opposed to other nonnuclear strategic assets in the cyber/space/advanced conventional domain to achieve this goal.²³ The talk of “winning wars” may be an attempt to talk up emerging capabilities and keep the PLA incentivized in the coming decades of military modernization, or it may simply be a signal attempting to intimidate the United States.

Collectively, these domestic political changes represent an unprecedented elevation of the national, social, and political value of China's nuclear weapons by the CCP in the Xi era. By CCP design, the past, present, and future of China's nuclear arsenal matters more domestically and politically than ever before.

The second domestic political change relates to a shrinking of the nuclear expert community, including established and more senior Chinese arms control experts, since 2012.²⁴ This community includes national weapons engineers, physicists, think tank analysts, and academics in fields such as international relations. Under former leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, these actors contributed to national debates around China's nuclear strategy and posture, and conducted exchanges with foreign counterparts through dialogues and knowledge exchange. This expert community facilitated China's signature to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996, and many were participants in dialogues with the United States, such as the discontinued Lab-to-Lab dialogue

of the 1990s, or bilateral Track 1.5 dialogues run by the Pacific Forum.²⁵ Yet the influence of these Chinese actors has seemingly waned in the Xi Jinping era.²⁶ Several Chinese domestic experts, for example, did not anticipate examples of Chinese expansion, such as the construction of the silo bases identified through open-source commercial satellite imagery in 2021.²⁷ As China's military builds up, the level of informed insight that can be offered by this community of outward-facing experts—particularly of mid- to senior-level experts—seems to be shrinking.

This contraction can be attributed in part to practical factors, such as constrained mobility during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and the reality that some of China's senior nuclear experts are now reaching retirement age.²⁸ The contraction also reflects broader restructuring of the domestic expert landscape in the Xi era and reorganization of disciplines within Chinese academic institutions. For example, the rise of party committees in universities has increased, as have changes to the study of international relations within one of the top-tier universities based in Beijing, Tsinghua University, where, for example, the study of national security is separate from area studies.²⁹

The domestic environment in which Chinese nuclear strategy is debated has become more centralized and politicized. The effects of these changes are as yet unknown. The near-term outcome of this contraction could be a more CCP-aligned, paranoid, younger, and strategically less informed Chinese expert community capable of engaging on nuclear issues with outsiders. As higher education has come under tighter political control, newer scholars may face greater domestic political scrutiny over what they say and write, limiting the potential for candid conversation in dialogue with foreign counterparts. Although we should not assume

21 Brandon J. Babin, “Xi Jinping's Strangelove: The Need for a Deterrence-Based Offset Strategy,” in *Modernizing Deterrence: How China Coerces, Compels, and Deters*, ed. Roy D. Kamphausen, February 16, 2023, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/modernizing-deterrence-how-china-coerces-compels-and-deters/>.

22 Hiim, Fravel, and Trøan, “The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma,” 147–87.

23 On this, see Cunningham, *Under the Nuclear Shadow*.

24 Tong Zhao offers some additional factors in “Political Drivers of China's Changing Nuclear Policy: Implications for US-China Nuclear Relations and International Security,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2024, 21–23, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Zhao_Political%20Drivers_final-2024.pdf.

25 David Santoro and Robert Gromoll, “On the Value of Nuclear Dialogue with China, Pacific Forum,” 2020, https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/issuesinsights_Vol20No1.pdf. On the historical role of these actors over time in diplomatic arenas and Track 2 dialogues, see also Nicola Horsburgh, *China and Global Nuclear Order* (Oxford University Press, 2015), and Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton University Press, 2007). RAND published a report in 2023 looking at how to deepen Track 2 dialogues between the United States and China; see Amanda Kerrigan, Lydia Grek, and Michael J. Mazarr, “The United States and China—Designing a Shared Future, The Potential for Track 2 Initiatives to Design an Agenda for Coexistence,” RAND, November 21, 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2850-1.html.

26 Tong Zhao, “Underlying Challenges and Near-Term Opportunities for Engaging China,” *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-01/features/underlying-challenges-and-near-term-opportunities-engaging-china>.

27 Tong Zhao, “Political Drivers of China's Changing Nuclear Policy,” 8–9.

28 Tong Zhao, “Political Drivers of China's Changing Nuclear Policy,” 23.

29 Yuxuan Jia and Ziluan Zeng, “Yan Xuetong Warns of Insulation of International Relations Discipline in China,” *The East Is Red*, April 2, 2024, <https://www.eastisred.com/p/yan-xuetong-warns-insulation-of-international>.

that this will make Beijing uninterested in arms control, or that a younger, more politically focused expert community will support larger forces and changed nuclear doctrine, the environment today prioritizes—to an unprecedented level—CCP preferences. More effort might be required to build shared understanding of nuclear strategy between Chinese experts and foreign counterparts. And it may be that a more centralized emerging nuclear community will narrow space for debate on force development, deployment, and use, or will reduce interaction between informed Chinese participants and outside actors on risk reduction and crisis management. Perhaps because the opportunities will be narrower as policy evolves, continued engagement is likely to be increasingly important.

Interaction Between China and the United States

China has become increasingly clear in outlining how specific US technologies affect its own strategic choices. Even decades ago, in the late 1990s, high-profile Chinese figures like former ambassador Sha Zukang never minced his words in calling out what he considered the damaging effect of US ballistic missile defense in Asia on China's small nuclear arsenal.³⁰ Chinese fears about the US deepening its commitment to missile defense continued into the 2000s following US abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2003. More recently, in the 2010s and 2020s, these concerns have sharpened—still centered around damage limitation capabilities (missile defense), but with additional interest in conventional counterforce strikes in US nuclear strategy, evident in the 2018 and 2022 US nuclear posture reviews (NPRs)³¹ as well as the US decision to withdraw from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019. The US decision around INF especially was seen in Beijing as a deliberate effort by the US to increase its conventional counterforce capabilities in the Northeast Asian region to counter Chinese theater-level missiles in the region.³² Work in 2024 by Li Bin and Wu Riqiang argues that three specific sets of technology undermine China's nucle-

ar deterrent: the high kill probability of US missile defense interceptors in coordination with US allies in the region; US anti-submarine warfare limiting China's emerging SSBN capability; and a US space-based system (Ground Moving Target Indicator) to track Chinese mobile missiles.³³

Yet China's nuclear deterrent has only recently ballooned to deal with the external concerns and challenges above. Why did China take so long? Here domestic political considerations, combined with lessons from other nuclear powers, might offer some insight. As noted earlier, since 2012 nuclear weapons have assumed greater political and social value and prestige, especially when attached, as they are by Xi, to China's wider road to revival and national rejuvenation as a great power. China might also be looking to the experiences of other nuclear weapons states in managing their relations with the US. This includes Russia as well as other nuclear weapons states like India and North Korea. Yet how lessons drawn from nuclear decision-making in Russia, India, and North Korea might have shaped—actively or inadvertently—contemporary Chinese strategic decisions remains poorly understood.

Challenges and Responses from the US and Wider Region

US and regional responses to evolving Chinese nuclear strategy have so far focused largely on technological advancements rather than domestic politics. This approach has led to calls for US nuclear strategy to go beyond counterforce (military locations) targeting to include countervalue (population centers) targets in China as well.³⁴ Other experts recommend a buildup in US nuclear forces once the United States is no longer bound by the New START Treaty (likely from February 2026), as well as increased regional nuclear commitments to allies and a return to controversial capabilities featured in the 2018 NPRs such as the sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N).³⁵ Others have called for the US to adopt a sole-purpose nuclear doctrine (but not NFU) as part of a transition to an active denial strategy, one

30 Sha Zukang, "Can BMD Really Enhance Security?," Remarks at the Second US-China Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation, April 28, 1999, Monterey, California; Chinese-Russian Press Communiqué on Consultations on Issues Pertaining to the ABM Treaty, April 14, 1999, <http://www.nti.org/db/china/engdocs/chrus499.htm>.

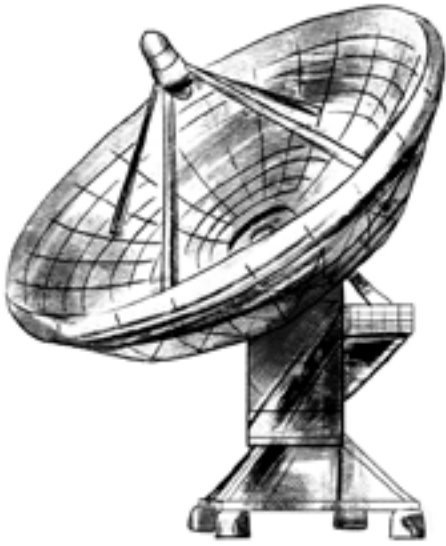
31 "Trump's US Nuclear Posture Review," <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302062/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>; "Biden's Nuclear Posture Review in 2022," <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

32 Hiim, Fravel, and Trøan, "The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma," 147–87.

33 Bin Li and Riqiang Wu, "US Strategy of Damage Limitation vis-à-vis China: Long-Term Programs and Effects," *China International Strategy Review*, 2024.

34 Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," May 1, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/us-strategy-and-force-posture-for-an-era-of-nuclear-tripolarity/>.

35 CGSR, "China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer."



that would also require allies to do more in terms of conventional deterrence.³⁶ It is unclear whether attempts by the US State Department in the Biden era to discuss NFU with China will continue in the second Trump administration. The 2024 speech by Vipin Narang, then-acting US secretary of defense for space policy, makes clear that the United States will continue to seek dialogue and forms of risk reduction.³⁷ All of these recommendations and approaches will likely have implications for long-standing discussions over mutual vulnerability—something long desired in Beijing, but something about which Washington has so far resisted official declarations.³⁸

In the immediate term, US partners and allies in Asia appear concerned that as China's nuclear arsenal expands, Beijing will increasingly become more confident in its ability to deter the United States' use of nuclear weapons.³⁹ For Taiwan, this confidence might lead China to initiate conventional conflict,

without fear of escalation to nuclear use from the US.⁴⁰ Outside the region, US commitments to the security of NATO because of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine have filtered into the Asian regional security context, with Asian allies concerned about the ability and political will of the US to operate in multiple theaters simultaneously.

These fears reinvigorate preexisting domestic debates around nuclear weapons proliferation for some, as well as new deployment options in an extended deterrence for others. In South Korea, extended deterrence was reaffirmed in April 2023 through the Washington Declaration between the US and South Korea, but debates over the reliability of that commitment remain.⁴¹ In Japan, China's growing military capabilities and assertiveness have contributed to closer cooperation with the US over missile defense, continued consultation through the US-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue, and internal debates about nuclear sharing and conventional precision-strike options.⁴²

Wider multilateral US partner and allied responses to changes in Chinese strategic power have started to take shape. For example, AUKUS has catalyzed closer scientific, legal, political, and military discussions among Australia, the UK, and the US, a significant shift regardless of whether the arrangement delivers specific outputs on the timetable announced. Extending new partnerships into AUKUS Pillar II (emerging technologies), perhaps incorporating Japan and South Korea, could have a compounding effect in terms of scientific cooperation.⁴³ Put bluntly, China cannot re-create these multi-state global arrangements in strategic technology.

Conclusion

China's nuclear expansion is occurring at a time of major domestic political change, with implications for Chinese nuclear strategy. These developments

36 Quincy Institute, "Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable US Defense Strategy in Asia," June 22, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/research/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/#executive-summary>.

37 Narang, "Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies." US interest in dialogue and risk reduction is also evident in an interview with US Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart in 2024 in *Arms Control Today*, "Engaging China and Russia on Arms Control: An Interview with US Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart," May 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-05/interviews/engaging-china-and-russia-arms-control-interview-us-assistant-secretary>.

38 David Santoro, ed., "US-China Mutual Vulnerability Perspectives on the Debate," *Pacific Forum Issues and Insights*, May 2022, <https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Issues-Insights-Vol.-22-SR-2.pdf>.

39 A parallel can be drawn to Russia and the war in Ukraine. See Michael O'Hanlon & Caitlin Talmadge, "America Shouldn't Insist on a Strategic Defeat of Russia," <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4356734-america-shouldnt-insist-on-a-strategic-defeat-of-russia/12/13/2023>.

40 Bates Gill, "Introduction: Meeting the Challenge of China's WMD Buildup," *National Bureau of Asian Research*, NBR special report #109, May 2024, 5.

41 On this, please see Do Young Lee's article in this roundtable.

42 Wakana Mukai, "China's Nuclear Modernization and Its Implications for Japan," May 22, 2024, *National Bureau for Asian Research*, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-nuclear-modernization-and-its-implications-for-japan/>.

43 These observations are drawn from author interactions with the strategic policy community in Australia in February 2024, and with Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) and Ministry of Defence (MOD) officials in the UK in 2023 and 2024.

prompt a rethinking for foreign governments as to how best to engage with China in the nuclear domain.

Above all, foreign discussions with China on nuclear strategy will likely be shaped by and tethered to the ideological party and political preferences and the worldview of Xi Jinping to a higher degree than before. Indeed, strategic concepts are being contested already, such as preferences in China and Russia for the term “political stability” over “strategic stability.”⁴⁴ Engagements around arms control should therefore factor in not just technical assessments and awareness of Xi Jinping’s own statements on nuclear matters—as they likely do already—but also potential domestic political costs and pressures for Chinese counterparts. However, opportunities for engagement also exist, such as upgrading the P5 (Permanent Five of the UN Security Council) nuclear glossary of terms and expanding discussion in a P5-wide context around pre-missile launch notification built on actions China has taken unilaterally recently, as well as with Russia.

A domestic political lens for understanding the evolution of China’s nuclear arsenal also highlights that there may be utility in appealing to arguments around concepts like mutual vulnerability and NFU because they have strong political, rather than simply military, value for China. Yet these concepts will need to be discussed carefully, busting historical myths where necessary. For example, the historical scholarly record now shows that during the Cold War US-Soviet strategic stability—as it was then conceived—was not straightforward, not least because Soviets did not feel mutual vulnerability was enough.⁴⁵ Bringing in examples from American or European historical experiences may be less sensitive and could help reduce overconfidence around the strategic value of mutual vulnerability.

As demonstrated in this article, current-day emphasis in China on historical commemoration showcases

how politically valuable China’s strategic capabilities have become, and exclusively technical assessments of the balance of forces or nuclear posture miss these dimensions. Domestic political changes also matter for gauging which geopolitical arguments and by whom matter to China, especially beyond the US-China lens. As China enters a new era with respect to its nuclear forces, it is important to consider not just technologies and capabilities, but the wider domestic changes afoot. ●

Dr. Nicola Leveringhaus (MPhil, DPhil, Oxon) is reader in international relations in the Department of War Studies, King’s College London. She specializes in the security of Northeast Asia, especially related to nuclear weapons and China. For 2025–26, she is a research affiliate of nuclear knowledges at CERI, Sciences Po, and is a board member for BASIC’s NPT Monitor and NUTRI project. She was part of the Beyond Nuclear Deterrence network at Harvard University (2022–24). Dr. Leveringhaus lectured at Sheffield University (2015–16) and was a British Academy postdoctoral research fellow (2012–15) and stipendiary lecturer in international relations (Trinity College, 2014–15) at Oxford University. She has been a senior visiting scholar at Tsinghua University and predoctoral fellow at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies. Her second book, *China and Global Nuclear Order: From Estrangement to Active Engagement* (Oxford University Press) was nominated for the 2017 ECPR Hedley Bull Prize.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks Dr. Lauren Sukin, Dr. Rohan Mukherjee, Professor Peter Trubowitz, and Professor Rosemary Foot, as well as participants in the LSE US Nuclear Strategy Conference where a first draft of this paper was presented in June 2024.

44 See Tong Zhao, “Political Drivers of China’s Changing Nuclear Policy.”

45 A recent piece (written after the first draft of this paper) by James Cameron in this journal develops this argument in great detail; please see “Negotiating Primacy: Strategic Stability, Superpower Arms Control, and the End of the Cold War,” *Texas National Security Review*, 2025, <https://tnsr.org/2025/03/negotiating-primacy-strategic-stability-superpower-arms-control-and-the-end-of-the-cold-war/>.