Nuclear China in the Twenty-First Century

Status and Implications for the World and Europe

CNS
OCCASIONAL PAPER
#60 · JULY 2024

David Santoro
Foreword by the Hon. Rose Gottemoeller

Middlebury Institute *of* International Studies at Monterey
James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies

Nuclear China in the Twenty-First Century

Status and Implications for the World and Europe

David Santoro
With a Foreword by the Hon. Rose Gottemoeller

James Martin Center of Nonproliferation Studies
Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey

460 Pierce Street, Monterey, CA 93940, USA
Phone: +1 (831) 647-4154
Fax: +1 (831) 647-3519

www.nonproliferation.org **www.middlebury.edu/institute**

This study was made possible by the generous support of the German Federal Foreign Office. It was coordinated and edited by CNS Senior Fellow Miles A. Pomper.

Contents

Foreword

Rose Gottemoeller

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) woke up to threats from the Indo-Pacific when Pyongyang tested missiles in 2017. All of a sudden, every single NATO capital was within range of North Korea's new missiles, and the allies as one reacted with alarm. [1]

At the time, China was still very much viewed as the land of opportunity for Europe, with trade and economic issues driving enthusiastic cooperation under the aegis of the European Union (EU). A Comprehensive Investment Agreement was under negotiation and a top priority for the EU. European members of both NATO and the EU did not want to see China as a threat. Within a few short years, however, that picture had changed. China's aggressive marketing of a Huawei 5-G communications network and acquisition of infrastructure, especially European ports, was a wake-up, first in NATO and later the EU. By 2020, the EU had put a hold on the ratification of the barely completed Comprehensive Investment Agreement. [2]

Since then, the Europeans have been grappling with what to do about China. For those with trade and commercial interests, China remains an enormous opportunity. It is also a necessity, given its place in global supply chains for numerous important products, from iPhones to steel and lumber. The EU continues to sort through issues with Beijing, regulating when it can, imposing tariffs when it must, and opposing dumping at every turn.[3] By and large, however, it has stayed engaged.

NATO, as a military alliance, has focused on security, the deterrence and defense equation. It too has remained engaged, meeting with Beijing in military-to-military staff talks that range from the global security situation (including Russia's war in Ukraine) to maritime security, NATO's Strategic Concept, or China's military modernization.[4] NATO also sustains a political-military dialogue with China that has produced a steady schedule of consultations over the past five years on topics including climate change and arms control. [5]

---

[1] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_146213.htm?selectedLocale=en

[2] https://www.csis.org/analysis/rise-and-demise-eu-china-investment-agreement-takeaways-future-german-debate-china

[3] https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/china_en

[4] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_212296.htm

[5] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_210521.htm?selectedLocale=en

At the same time, NATO must regard China with increasing concern, as the new (2022) Strategic Concept conveys. As Lieutenant General Adamczak, the host of the military staff talks, said: "Our new Strategic Concept makes clear that China's stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values, but [...] we remain open to constructive engagement, including to build reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the Alliance's security interests."[6]

This important new study by David Santoro and CNS perfectly captures this delicate balance. European countries, some in both NATO and the EU, others in one or the other of these major organizations, must be concerned by the rise of China. But they also have to figure out how to engage China, to advance mutual interests, but also for some modicum of predictability about China's motivations and goals.

Nuclear China in the Twenty-First Century: Status and Implications for the World and Europe is the first comprehensive examination of how European countries should regard China's nuclear modernization, which has developed an alarming momentum, especially over the past decade. Santoro has a number of sound recommendations about steps Europeans can take to better prepare themselves for a China much more disposed to throw its nuclear weight around. These include getting smarter about nuclear China and China-Russia strategic cooperation that may exacerbate nuclear threats. His suggestions include ramping up defense cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific, some of which are US treaty allies. And they include enhancing cooperation between NATO and the EU to enhance collective resilience.

These and a wealth of other good ideas make this unique report a must-read for European policymakers as well as for their counterparts in the United States and the Indo-Pacific. It will launch an important discussion about how to bring the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific together to contemplate the threats—but also, importantly, the policy opportunities—of a nuclear China. As Santoro clearly emphasizes, forward-looking diplomacy will have to be a part of the equation: "Europe should make a point of championing arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament wherever and whenever possible." This is a welcome message.

[6] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_212296.htm

Introduction

In August 2021, shortly after new evidence surfaced that China might be expanding its nuclear arsenal much more extensively and rapidly than previously assumed, Admiral Charles Richard, Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, described Beijing's military investments as a "strategic breakout."[7] He underscored that the "explosive growth and modernization of [China's] nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking," adding that "that word, breathtaking, may not be enough."[8] Since then, several senior officials in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere have echoed that message and the final report of the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States published in October 2023 concluded that at its current pace, China "will reach rough quantitative parity with the United States in deployed nuclear warheads by the mid-2030s."[9]

The result has been the emergence of work, including by this author, to understand this unprecedented development.[10] This work is in its infancy, however, and more is needed to grasp the scale and scope of Chinese nuclear modernization (especially given that much of it is shrouded in secrecy) as well as its implications for strategic stability, deterrence, and arms control and risk reduction. Existing work has focused primarily on the implications for the United States and, to some extent, the United States and Russia. Yet it is also important to grapple with the implications for Europe, especially the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and reflect on actions that Europeans, individually or with others, should take in response.

---

[7] Quoted by David Vergun in "China, Russia Pose Strategic Challenges for U.S., Allies, Admiral Says," *DOD News,* August 12, 2021.

[8] *America's Strategic Posture,* The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, Oct. 2023, p. 8.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] See David Santoro, notably *U.S.-China Nuclear Relations – The Impact of Strategic Triangles* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2021) as well as more reports on this topic by the same author on the Pacific Forum website at www.pacforum.org. See also *China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer – Implications for U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Strategy* (Livermore, CA: CGSR, 2023).

Nuclear China, Then and Now

The world shook when China developed nuclear weapons. Yet quickly there was apparent consensus, at least in the United States and the West, to ignore "nuclear China." Only recently have many voiced concerns again, especially as it now appears that Beijing is engaged in a crash nuclear build-up.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The Nuclear Red Scare

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 led many to express concerns about the implications for regional peace and security. Fears increased further when it became clear, notably after the Korean War and then the Taiwan Strait confrontations of 1954-1955, that Beijing was developing a nuclear arsenal. In the Cold War context, the United States was especially concerned because the Soviet Union initially agreed to provide nuclear assistance to China, as it considered the Chinese arsenal "a contribution to the socialist camp's collective deterrent capability."[11] However, Sino-Soviet cooperation never materialized because the Soviet Union, too, was concerned about China going nuclear. Soviet officials feared that China could entrap them in an unwanted confrontation with the United States. U.S. officials thus tried to prevent China from reaching its goal by promoting arms control and even considering military options against the Chinese program, including with the Soviets.[12] The United States ended up abandoning the military option, however, deeming it ineffective and too risky.[13]

Nuclear China Ignored

Shortly after Beijing tested its first atomic weapon in 1964, however, it did not take long for the world to ignore nuclear China. The United States and others did so because it became clear that China had neither the ability nor, seemingly, the willingness to engage in nuclear competition.
For one thing, the views of Mao Zedong had a powerful influence on Chinese nuclear strategy.[14] These views, based on the limited utility of nuclear weapons, supported maintaining a strategy of assured retaliation and of not

[11] Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 11.

[12] William Burr and Jeffrey R. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle,'" *International Security,* vol. 25, no. 3, Winter 2000-2001, pp. 54-99.

[13] Goldstein, p. 104.

[14] M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), notably pp. 236-269.

integrating nuclear strategy with conventional strategy or pursuing nuclear warfighting, even limited. Plainly, Chinese thinking on nuclear weapons rested on the belief that these weapons only serve to prevent nuclear coercion and deter nuclear attack.

In that spirit, Beijing claimed – and to this day continues to claim – to have a "self-defense nuclear strategy" and to maintain tight control over its arsenal.[15] Beijing never delegated authority over nuclear strategy to senior officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), for instance. Also in that spirit, Beijing gave the Second Artillery Force, the component of the PLA created in 1966 to control Chinese nuclear weapons, the sole mission of conducting a nuclear counterstrike, and it only developed a small nuclear force and refused to engage in arms races. Beijing, plainly, focused on developing "the minimum means of reprisal," just enough to conduct an effective nuclear counterstrike.[16] Beijing thus developed a nuclear force based on missiles rather than gravity bombs (missiles are not adequate for counterstrike purposes), maintained a de-mated force posture (because it had no intention to engage in nuclear warfighting), and adopted a no-first-use (NFU) policy and gave negative security assurances to non-nuclear-weapon states.

There is another reason why many in the West concluded that they could live with a nuclear China: the belief that the benefits of U.S.-China rapprochement outweighed the costs of confrontation. To the United States and the West, the Soviet Union was the primary adversary and, as a result, it was better to have China on their side. U.S. officials were especially quick to reach that conclusion because, despite China's initial fears of encirclement and determination to respond to what it perceived as U.S. nuclear bullying, Beijing grew more worried about Moscow and directed its nuclear arsenal primarily against the Soviet Union, not the United States.

In hindsight, Beijing's decision to orient its arsenal primarily against the Soviet Union was not surprising: China had always had important reservations about the Soviet Union, even before they forged an alliance relationship, and Beijing went nuclear in part because it felt that it could not trust Moscow.[17] Beijing was later vindicated when, in 1969, Sino-Soviet forces clashed in border fighting and Moscow threatened action against China's nascent nuclear capability.[18]

---

[15] For a long time, China's nuclear strategy was based on the statements made by Chinese leaders and internal doctrinal publications. References to China's "self-defense nuclear strategy" first appeared in the 2006 Defense White Paper. See Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in 2006.*

[16] Jeffrey Lewis, *The Minimum Means of Reprisal* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

[17] Goldstein, p. 65.

[18] Goldstein, notably pp. 71-76.

It was in that context that the United States and, by extension, the West, concluded that they should exploit and cement the Sino-Soviet split, which meant siding with China.

So, as they began to engage (while also hedging against) China from the late 1960s, the United States and Western countries adopted an "ignore-China" policy when it came to nuclear issues. That policy was not meant to last forever. In 1965, for instance, Morton Halperin stressed that nuclear China was not a problem for now, but "In the long tun they [the Chinese] undoubtedly see a nuclear capability as giving them an ability to deter an American attack… and… laying the groundwork for a more vigorous attempt to expand Chinese influence throughout the world."[19]

Still, the U.S./Western ignore-China policy took deep roots and became the default approach for the reasons just described. Moreover, immediately after the Cold War Beijing slowly began to endorse the multilateral arms control and nonproliferation regime. China became a party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1992, and it then signed up to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention, among other key instruments. To the United States and the West, then, it appeared that China would not become much of a nuclear problem.

Concerns Return

From the late 1990s, however, many in the United States began to raise concerns about nuclear China. For instance, in 1998, a Select Committee led by U.S. Representative Christopher Cox found that China had conducted covert operations in the United States in the 1980s-1990s to enhance its missiles and build other weapons.[20] Others pointed out that China had stopped worrying about Russia, the China-Russia relationship was flourishing, and the Chinese focus had shifted to the United States, especially after the U.S. response to the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 and displays of U.S. superiority in the 1990-1991 Gulf War and 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Relatedly, observers stressed that China was ramping up the modernization of its strategic force, the diversification of its delivery systems, and the number of nuclear weapons. They also explained that China was developing an arsenal capable of striking the U.S. homeland, in addition to improving its ability to project power into neighboring waters and in the space and cyber domains, posing a threat to the U.S. forward presence in the Indo-Pacific and putting U.S. allies at risk.

---

[19] Morton H. Halperin, "China in the Postwar World," *China Quarterly,* no. 21, January-March 1965, p. 86.

[20] The full report is accessible here: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRPT-105hrpt851/pdf/GPO-CRPT-105hrpt851.pdf

A major problem was – and still is – China's silence about the size of its growing nuclear arsenal. Today, experts estimate that the Chinese arsenal consists of "roughly 500 warheads."[21] While it is much smaller than the U.S. and Russian arsenals (estimated to sit at 5,244 and 5,889 warheads, respectively), it is bigger than the United Kingdom's (estimated to consist of 225 warheads) and France's (estimated to include 290 warheads).[22] Another problem was – and remains – China's refusal to articulate a level at which it would have "enough" weapons. Relatedly, in the 1990s China became the only country of the permanent five (P5) members of the United Nations Security Council that left open the possibility of producing more fissile material for explosive purposes, and it opted against transparency about its capabilities of the kind adopted by the other P5 members.

China's modernization of its nuclear delivery systems also became problematic. In the 2000s, China's land-based nuclear missile force began to grow fast, and today includes mobile, solid-fueled systems. Because unlike the United States and Russia it was not bound by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, China was able to build a force of that range.[23] China also began to develop penetrative aids and MIRV missiles, while pursuing hypersonic glide vehicles, which make systems more maneuverable, faster, and more capable of penetrating existing missile defense systems. Finally, China began to bring online sea and air nuclear platforms.

China argued that these developments were defensive, its self-defense nuclear strategy and NFU policy remained intact, and its modernization efforts were consistent with minimum deterrence and solely aimed at building a "lean and effective" force.[24] These became codewords to highlight the Chinese goal of ensuring that its force is reliable and survivable, especially given improving U.S. missile defense and conventional capabilities as well as the U.S. shift of attention to the Indo-Pacific.

Yet in addition to doubting the strength and veracity of China's NFU policy, the United States and others became worried that China might abandon minimum deterrence and "sprint to nuclear parity" with the U.S. (and Russian) arsenals, especially because, unlike China, the United States and Russia were reducing their arsenals.[25] Even without parity, many feared that China might exploit its

[21] Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, "Chinese nuclear weapons, 2024," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, vol. 80, no. 1, Jan. 2024, pp. 49-72.

[22] "World nuclear forces," *SIPRI Yearbook 2023,* accessible on the SIPRI website at https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2023

[23] Of note, the United States withdrew from the INF treaty in August 2019 and Russia subsequently announced that it considered the treaty to be dead. Since then, the United States and Russia are no longer bound by the treaty.

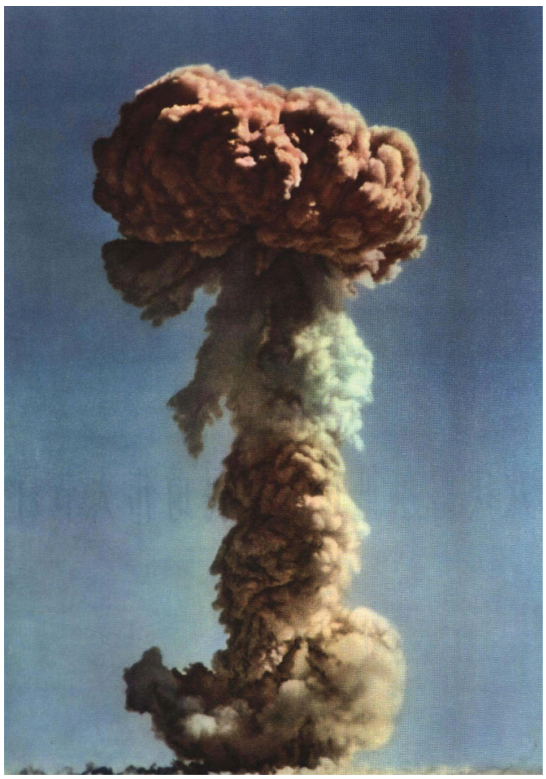
[24] M. Taylor Fravel reports that the "lean-and-effective" formulation was first made by Commander Li Shuqing in a 1978 speech. Fravel, *Active Defense,* p. 261.

[25] See Michael O. Wheeler, *Nuclear Parity with China?* (Washington, DC: IDA, 2012), p. 23.

growing nuclear strength with provocative actions at the conventional level. Many also became concerned that China's evolving nuclear capabilities would soon present Beijing with new strategic options, including a launch-on-warning posture or limited nuclear warfighting.[26] The potential for inadvertent escalation became a topic of interest, too, given the diversification of the Chinese arsenal, Beijing's decision to use dual-capable, "hot-swappable" systems (i.e., systems that can carry either a conventional or a nuclear warhead, with warheads that can be swapped onto launch-ready missiles quickly), and the strains imposed on command-and-control systems.

These worries were magnified by China's refusal to join the process of nuclear reductions. While endorsing much of the multilateral arms control and nonproliferation regime, China conditioned its willingness to reduce its forces on deep cuts in the U.S. and Russian arsenals. The United Kingdom and France (the two of P5 members) did not do so, and each conducted nuclear reductions of their own. Plainly, the interim progress made by the United States and Russia in reducing their nuclear arsenals did not lead to a Chinese decision to join the process and, during that time, China pressed on with building an increasingly sophisticated arsenal.

The *laissez-faire* attitude towards China remained, however, for two reasons. First, because the United States and the West had other priorities. After the Cold War, the U.S./Western focus shifted from the Soviet Union to the "loose-nuke" problem: the risk that poorly guarded nuclear weapons or materials from the Soviet Union might fall into the hands of terrorists, or that nuclear experts might share their know-how with bad actors. Then, starting in the mid-1990s, another priority emerged: preventing small "pariah" states from acquiring nuclear weapons, notably Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, an additional focus area was strengthening the nuclear security regime, to prevent nuclear terror attacks.



Explosion from China's Project 596, Source: WikiMedia Commons

[26] See Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 164-170 and, from the same author, *On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue* (Livermore, CA: CGSR, 2020).

Second, and relatedly, the thinking was that addressing these priorities required at least partial Chinese cooperation. The belief that China was part of the solution to address these problems thus drove the United States and others to puts their concerns about Chinese activities on the back burner. Case in point: in its response to the mounting North Korean nuclear problem, the United States was always careful not to make any significant adjustments to its deterrence posture in the region.[27]

That said, from the 2000s China was no longer ignored, at least by the United States. U.S. officials began to emphasize the need to pay attention to evolving Chinese nuclear and conventional capabilities and to jumpstart nuclear dialogue with Beijing. China declined engagement, however, arguing that "the conditions were not ripe" because the U.S. arsenal was much larger than China's and because, Chinese officials claimed, they would stand to lose as they would be required to accept a level of transparency that would compromise the survivability of their strategic force. Of course, rejecting dialogue did not stop China from seeking reassurance from the United States: Chinese officials pressed the United States to adopt an NFU policy and to accept mutual vulnerability as the basis of the U.S.-China strategic relationship, as is the case in the U.S.-Russia strategic relationship. The United States refused, stressing that policy changes should only be the consequence of dialogue.

By the mid-2010s, the United States (and a few others) had become frustrated with China's continued rejection of dialogue. A major source of frustration was also China's decision to initiate a major overhaul of its military to develop "world class forces" by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2049, with unclear implications for China's nuclear weapons.[28] Moreover, as the broader U.S.-China relationship was becoming increasingly competitive, and as the United States was gearing up to make decisions about the modernization of its arsenal in the context of rising nuclear dangers (from North Korea as well as Russia), it appeared inevitable that the U.S.-China strategic relationship would not escape change. In other words, while they had been traditionally in the background of the relationship, nuclear weapons were about to move to the foreground.

---

[27] U.S. strategy did not target China, with only one caveat: the U.S. regional ballistic missile defense posture sought to provide protection to U.S. forward-deployed forces or allies from any missile attack, regardless of its source.

[28] Xi Jinping first announced the military reforms at the Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2013. Yet it was at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017 that he stressed that the armed forces should become "world class" by mid-century. See Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, N. D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow (eds.), *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assuring Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019).

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

A New China, A New Approach to China

While they date back to the late 1990s, U.S concerns about China had grown considerably by the mid-2010s because Washington felt that Beijing might be on the verge of changing its nuclear strategy and expanding its weapon program in a way that would tip the overall strategic balance of power in its favor. Caitlin Talmadge put it best, stressing that the United States became "concerned that the erosion of what it sees as a longstanding position of nuclear advantage relative to China."[29]

These concerns became more visible when the United States began reassessing its entire policy toward China, letting go of its longstanding "engage-but-hedge" approach in favor of strategic competition.[30] Until the mid-2010s, and since the early 1970s, the United States and many in the Western world had sought to engage, while also hedging against, China to integrate it into the international system, and wait until it changed economically, politically, and geopolitically. Yet by the mid-2010s the United States had assessed that China would not change, especially under Xi Jinping, who has ruled China with an iron fist, stopped and even backtracked on economic reforms, and begun to contest the international order. The United States thus changed its approach and opted to compete against, and outrightly counter, China.[31] Others in the West and beyond also began asking themselves questions about China, but they took little, if any, action.

A New Nuclear Direction?

Still, in the mid-to-late 2010s, it was unclear what nuclear future China was pursuing.

Some suggested that concerns about China opting for a bigger and more threatening arsenal might be overblown. They highlighted that at that point the most significant (or most visible) change to China's nuclear weapon program in the context of its military reforms was renaming the Second Artillery Force the PLA Rocket Force and upgrading it to full-service status, equal to the army, navy, and air force; until then, the Second Artillery Force had been an independent branch, in a category of its own, though over time it had grown to be considered more or less equal to one service. They argued that the new

---

[29] Caitlin Talmadge, *The U.S.-China Nuclear Relationship: Why Competition Is Likely to Intensify* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2019), p. 5.

[30] The "engage-but-hedge" approach is best described by Aaron L. Friedberg in "Competing with China," *Survival,* vol. 60, no. 3, June-July 2018, pp. 7-64.

[31] It was first described in *The National Security Strategy of the United States* of 2017.

Rocket Force name and its upgrade to a full service merely codified the force's *de facto* status, giving it the status and prestige it deserved.[32]

According to that line of thinking, the most likely developments would then involve the continuation of steady, yet relatively modest, growth of the Chinese nuclear arsenal. Moreover, and as suggested by Chinese official statements, multiple Chinese media reports, and Chinese strategists, the idea was that China would maintain the same nuclear policy and strategy.

Significantly, in describing the Rocket Force, Xi used language similar to the 2015 Defense White Paper about the Second Artillery Force, saying that it would be "a fundamental force for the country's strategic deterrent, a strategic pillar for our country's great power status, and an important cornerstone in protecting national security."[33] A 2016 *China Daily* article added that China's nuclear policy would remain unchanged: "Reiterating the no-first-use nuclear weapons policy and the country's defensive nuclear strategy, [Ministry of National Defense Spokesman] Yang said China always keeps its nuclear capabilities at the minimum level required for safeguarding its national security."[34]

Furthermore, in addition to dismissing (to this day) the possibility of Chinese nuclear forces adopting a warfighting role, Beijing insisted that technological improvements would not affect China's policy and strategy. The PLA's 2013 *Science of Military Strategy,* for instance, makes clear that adoption of launch-on-warning would be consistent with China's NFU policy: "Rapid launch of nuclear missiles for counterattack is consistent with [China's] no first use policy."[35]

What's more, despite the creation of a new, operational command structure for the PLA, the Rocket Force's command and control systems did not appear to have changed. A 2016 article in *Rocket Force News,* for instance, stated that the Rocket Force is "a strategic military service directly controlled and used by the Central Party Committee, Central Military Commission, and Chairman Xi," and some Chinese even argued that centralization might be reinforced, suggesting that concerns about potential issues with command-and-control systems were misplaced.[36]

---

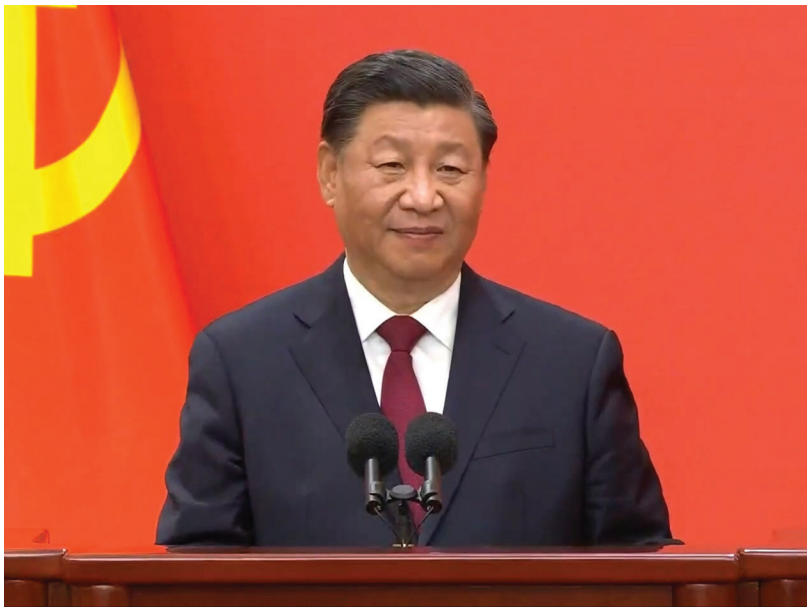
[32] See David C. Logan, "Making Sense of China's Missile Forces" in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA,* pp. 393-435.

[33] Wang Shibin and An Puzhong, "Founding Ceremony for Army Leading Organization, Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force Held in Beijing," *China Military Online,* Jan. 1, 2016.

[34] Zhao Lei and Li Xiaokun, "Three New Military Branches Created in Key PLA Reform," *China Daily,* Jan. 2, 2016.

[35] *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Military Science, 2013), p. 23.

[36] Huang Jinxin, "My Views on the Rocket Force as a Strategic Military Service," *Rocket Force News,* Jan. 13, 2016.



Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary Xi Jinping
Source: WikiMedia Commons

In sum, this line of analysis suggested that the Rocket Force might continue to focus on expanding and improving its conventional assets, while keeping (maybe even pushing) nuclear forces into the background even as China was bringing online new and more diversified nuclear systems.

But there was also another line of analysis, one that contended that China might pursue both a qualitatively and quantitatively superior – perhaps unmatched – nuclear arsenal.

The new Rocket Force name and upgrade to full-service status, the argument went, might lead to much greater autonomy, even independence, for the force, opening the door to radical changes in China's nuclear force structure and posture, and then in policy and strategy. In other words, change, even major change, was deemed a possibility.

In that spirit, Bates Gill and Adam Ni stressed that despite important similarities with the Second Artillery Force, official characterizations of the Rocket Force seemed to point to a much more expansive role and greater expectations for the new force.[37] They explained that at the Rocket Force's inauguration ceremony, Xi articulated a new formulation for the force's strategic requirements, arguing that it needed to "possess both nuclear and conventional [capabilities]" and be prepared to conduct "comprehensive deterrence and warfighting" operations.[38]

---

[37] Bates Gill and Adam Ni, "The People's Liberation Army Rocket Force: Reshaping China's Approach to Strategic Deterrence," *Australian Journal of International Affairs,* vol. 73, no. 2, January 2019, notably pp. 162-163.

[38] Ibid., p. 162.

The requirement to possess both nuclear and conventional capabilities is not new, but the emphasis on "comprehensive deterrence and warfighting" is, they opined, significant because it suggests that the Rocket Force now needs to operate not only across regions and distances, but also across land, sea, aerospace, and electromagnetic spectrums, and do so for both deterrence and warfighting purposes.[39] The fact that Xi added that the Force should enhance its ability for strategic balancing" also suggests that China might envision a greater – nuclear – role for it.[40]

According to that line of analysis, then, faster growth of the Chinese nuclear arsenal was in the works. China might also adopt a much more aggressive nuclear posture, including the peacetime mating of warheads, an increase in alert status, endorsement of a launch-on-warning posture, and abandonment of its longstanding NFU policy and traditional practice of minimum deterrence, all of which are steps that some PLA officers (a minority, so far) had recommended occasionally.

With these changes, many speculated that China's nuclear doctrine and forces would be much more closely aligned with the country's conventional doctrine and forces. Nuclear forces, in other words, would have both a deterrence and warfighting mission. Presumably, nuclear and conventional forces would also be (further) integrated, and rocket force and emerging navy and air force nuclear assets would become active, rather than passive, components of China's evolving integrated strategic deterrence posture. Such integration could even be further enhanced through coordination with the new PLA Strategic Support Force, an independent branch (and a product of the reforms) which, per John Costello and Joe McReynolds, is intended to "create synergies between disparate information warfare capabilities in order to execute specific types of strategic missions that Chinese leaders believe will be decisive in future major wars."[41] In these circumstances, a relaxation of command and control systems over China's nuclear forces would not be far-fetched, and Beijing and the PLA might even choose to give some authority to the theatre commands to make nuclear use easier in the event of a crisis or war.

By the end of the 2010s, then, there was two competing narratives about China's nuclear future, and it was unclear whether Beijing would opt for nuclear continuity or nuclear change.

Even then, there was broad consensus among most U.S./Western national security experts that even if the balance tipped in favor of the "continuity

[39] Ibid., p. 162.

[40] Ibid., p. 163.

[41] John Costello and Joe McReynolds, "China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era" in Saunders, et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA,* p. 438.

scenario," some degree of change would take place, at least for three reasons. First, because the Chinese nuclear arsenal was set to increase, not decrease. Second, because the rapid and impressive modernization, diversification, and expansion of Chinese nuclear systems, especially the emergence of a nuclear triad, would make it increasingly difficult for China to maintain its longstanding nuclear policy and strategy. Third, and finally, because these changes would, de facto, create complications for command-and-control systems, even if the Central Military Commission maintains control.

China on the Road to Major-Nuclear-Power Status

When evidence surfaced in 2021 about the bigger-then-expected size and scale of China's nuclear ambitions, it became clear that change, even probably major change, was on the way.

The satellite images obtained by experts from the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) showed work underway on well over 100 new missile silos near Yumen, an unprecedent expansion of China's nuclear forces.[42] That expansion far exceeded U.S. projections, and projections have had to be revised upward since. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) assessed that China would double the size of its nuclear stockpile within the decade; the DOD, then, estimated that stockpile to be in the low 200s.[43] Yet in 2023 the DOD said that China continued "its rapid nuclear expansion," adding that "the PRC possessed more than 500 operational nuclear warheads as of May 2023 – on track to exceed previous projections."[44] The DOD also underscored that "the PRC will probably have over 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030."[45] What's more, there was – and still is – no end in sight for that growth, and Xi directing in 2021 that China "accelerate the construction of advanced strategic deterrent" capabilities suggests that it is likely to continue well into the future.[46] No wonder Admiral Charles Richard has talked about a "strategic breakout."[47]

By the early 2020s, there was thus no doubt that China had chosen a new direction for its nuclear arsenal, one that brings it close, or closer, to major-nuclear-power status.

---

[42] The first batch of evidence was reported by Joby Warrick in "China is building more than 100 new missile silos in its western desert, analysts say," *Washington Post,* Jun. 30, 2021.

[43] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020,* Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. IX.

[44] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2023,* Annual Report to Congress, U.S. Department of Defense, 2023, p. VIII.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Quoted in Tong Zhao, "What is Driving China's Nuclear Build-Up?" *Carnegie Endowment Commentary,* August 5, 2021.

[47] Vergun, "China, Russia Pose Strategic Challenges for U.S., Allies, Admiral Says."

Reflecting on this, a landmark report by the Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory concluded that "The ongoing rapid expansion of China's nuclear forces indicates that Beijing has made one of two decisions. Either it has decided that the current role of nuclear weapons in its strategy requires a far larger and more diverse force, or it has decided that the role of nuclear weapons in its strategy needs to change in ways that require a force that is far larger and more diverse."[48] The CGSR report goes on to stress that neither decision is good news, adding that there are key features of Chinese nuclear modernization indicating "the likelihood of significant change."[49] These include the development of a capability that will give it the ability to launch missiles under attack, the fielding of a large theatre force of dual-capable missiles with precision guidance capabilities enabling the effective use of low-yield weapons, and the apparent pursuit of a fractional orbital bombardment capability, despite its destabilizing potential.

The suggestion, plainly, is that China is moving away from its longstanding tradition of nuclear restraint characterized by minimum deterrence and NFU, and toward something much more ambitious. If there is lack of clarity, for now, about what that something is or will be, it is nonetheless abundantly clear that nuclear China today is – and tomorrow, will be – vastly different from nuclear China ten, twenty, or thirty-plus years ago. China today is emerging as a major nuclear-armed power, and it will not be long before it has emerged fully as such, a development that has far-reaching implications for many, certainly for the United States, but also for Europe.

[48] *China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer,* p. 13.

[49] Ibid.

The Implications of China's Emergence as a Major Nuclear Power

A China with a big and sophisticated nuclear arsenal will have a profound impact not only on the U.S.-China nuclear balance, but also on the global nuclear balance. It will thus affect peace and security way beyond the Indo-Pacific, notably the European continent.

GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

The U.S.-China Nuclear Balance

No one contests that the United States is the primary driver of China's nuclear modernization program. Beijing is concerned by Washington's nuclear superiority and its improved ability to find and destroy Chinese forces, or to intercept them with missile defenses. China, in other words, fears that the United States might be, or might become, capable of putting it in checkmate, achieving what Chinese diplomats and scholars often call "absolute security."[50]

To address that problem, China has been expanding and perfecting its arsenal. In addition to building more nuclear weapons at great speed, it has been investing in road-mobile missiles and sea-based platforms to make it more difficult for the United States to target its forces, and it is adding multiple re-entry vehicles to its missiles to penetrate U.S. missile defenses. As mentioned earlier, China also seems to have embraced tactical nuclear use and nuclear warfighting options.

Reflecting on the implications of China's nuclear build-up thus means reflecting first and foremost on the implications for the U.S.-China nuclear balance.

Irrespective of the scale and scope of China's build-up (and to some extent, how it is implemented), the outcome for the U.S.-China nuclear balance could be positive. Chinese nuclear forces could become more reliable and more survivable, which, according to deterrence theory, would help strengthen strategic stability and reduce the risks of conflict due to the fear of

[50] David Santoro and Robert Gromoll, "On the Value of Nuclear Dialogue with China," *Issues & Insights,* vol. 20, no. 1, Nov. 2020, p. 11.

escalation.[51] Note also that China has pursued a defensive military strategy, one which Beijing characterizes as "active defense" of Chinese national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and which promises only a counterattack (i.e., a response to aggression).[52] The U.S.-China nuclear balance could thus become less, not more, competitive as a result of Beijing's nuclear build-up.

A negative outcome is also possible, however. The Chinese build-up could trigger arms races, crises, and damage U.S.-China strategic stability. The United States might fear that China is sprinting to nuclear parity or nuclear superiority, and that in the interim Beijing might feel emboldened with a bigger and more sophisticated arsenal and, as a result, become aggressive at the conventional level, notably over Taiwan, which Beijing has always vowed to reunite with the mainland, including through the use of force if necessary; this is a situation known as a "stability-instability paradox."[53] This is a legitimate concern because China's active defense strategy is defensive but seeks to protect Chinese sovereignty in a system Beijing deems unfair because it reflects the legacy of the "century of humiliation" (when China was subjugated by the West and Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Besides, PLA documents includes references to a statement attributed to Deng Xiaoping that "active defense is not simply only defense, there is offense within defense."[54] The United States could thus conclude that it should trump the Chinese build-up and compete to maintain or expand its nuclear advantage.

On balance, a negative outcome is more likely. Recall that it was the fear of an emerging stability-instability paradox that led the United States to intensify its competition against the Soviet Union during the early Cold War, even as Washington and Moscow found themselves increasingly entrenched in a situation of mutual assured destruction. Similar developments are especially likely in the U.S.-China context because the United States is well ahead of China in the nuclear domain and, as a result, Washington will probably find it appealing to increase and cement its superiority over Beijing. Washington will also likely conclude that doing so is necessary given that the regional conventional balance of power is shifting fast in Beijing's favor.

There are already signs that the United States is heading in that direction. Consider the U.S. decision in 2018 to pursue a modern nuclear-armed, sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), a decision that the Biden administration

---

[51] Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[52] Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces,* 2013.

[53] Glenn Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror" in Paul Seabury (ed.), *The Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), pp. 184-201.

[54] Yu Jixun (ed.), *The Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* (Beijing: Press of the People's Liberation Army, 2004), p. 259.

sought to reverse in 2022 but that continues to receive support on Capitol Hill. The debate about whether to develop SLCM-N and its associated warhead stems primarily from concerns about Russia, but China is also an important consideration.[55] Similarly, the U.S. decision in 2019 to withdraw from the INF Treaty was made in response to Russia's violation of the treaty, yet also with China in mind. Following its first flight test of an INF-range (conventional) missile after the demise of the treaty, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said: "we want to make sure that we, as we need to, have the capability to deter Chinese bad behavior by having our own capability to strike at intermediate ranges."[56]

The suggestion, therefore, is that the United States will no longer remain idle in the face of China's build-up, and the result is a U.S.-China strategic relationship ripe for nuclear rivalry.

Of course, in theory, the United States and China could still avoid an unconstrained action-reaction cycle that damages bilateral strategic stability and increases the risks of conflict. They could, through dialogue and agreements, keep that cycle in check by managing their differences and limiting instability.

In practice, however, the prospects for success appear bleak because China continues to reject strategic dialogue and arms control with the United States, despite repeated U.S. attempts to jumpstart talks.[57] In November 2023, there was limited engagement following an initial contact between U.S. and Chinese officials.[58] It isn't clear that there will be follow-on work, however; significantly, for now, Beijing has turned down further engagement.[59] Even if there is a new meeting in the months to come, no one expects substantive (and sustained) dialogue to begin any time soon, let alone a breakthrough agreement to help manage the bilateral nuclear balance.

---

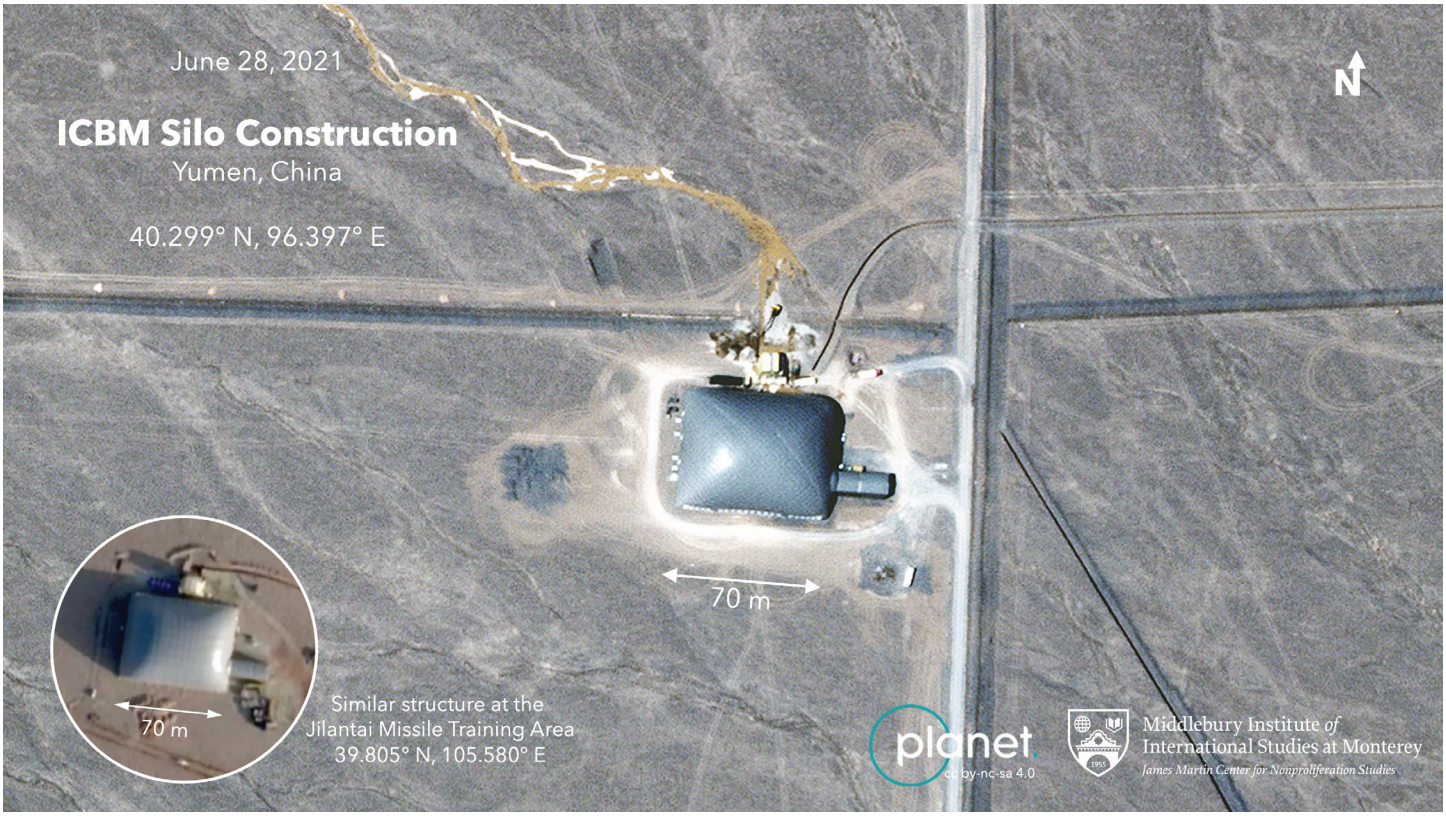
[55] "Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N)," Congressional Research Service, Dec. 16, 2022. See also, Matthew R. Costlow and Keith B. Payne, "TLAM-N and SLCM-N: Lessons for Extended Deterrence and Assuring Allies," National Institute for Public Policy, no. 567, Nov. 15, 2023.

[56] Quoted by Michelle Nichols in "Russia, China Seek UN Security Council Meeting on U.S. Missile Developments," *Reuters,* Aug. 21, 2019.

[57] The United States tried both a patient approach – waiting for Beijing to be ready – from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s, and a confrontational approach under the administration of Donald Trump in 2017-2020.

[58] "Assistant Secretary Mallory Stewart's Meeting with the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of Arms Control Sun Xiaobo," U.S. Department of State, Nov. 7, 2023.

[59] Mathias Hammer, "China declines to meet with US on nuclear arms control, US official says," *Semafor,* May 2, 2024.



In 2021, satellite images obtained by experts from the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) showed work underway on well over 100 new missile silos near Yumen, an unprecedented expansion of China's nuclear forces.
Source: Planet, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at MIIS

China continues to argue that "nothing has changed," i.e., that its nuclear policy (based on NFU) and nuclear posture (based on minimum deterrence) remain the same, even as there is ample evidence showing that it is engaged in a build-up. As a result, Beijing feels that it need not do anything that it was not doing before: no dialogue, no transparency, and no interest in supporting a moratorium on the production of fissile material for weapon purposes, among other things.

The Global Nuclear Balance

The problem also extends far beyond the sole U.S.-China nuclear balance. Because of the circumstances in which it is taking place, and because of Beijing's partnership choices, China's emergence as a major nuclear-armed power is affecting the global nuclear balance in its entirety.

China's nuclear build-up is not happening in a vacuum. It is happening at a time when other major nuclear dangers are rising. The primary danger emanates from Russia. Since the mid-to-late 2000s, a revanchist Russia has expressed its strong opposition to the European security order and, with its annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and especially since February 2022, it has been waging a war against Ukraine at least in part to push back against that order. During the war, Russia has made nuclear threats, flirted with nuclear use, and even apparently deployed tactical nuclear weapons

in Belarus, its ally; these developments, for that matter, have left China uncomfortable. This is not surprising: Russia, which possesses the biggest nuclear arsenal in the world and has recently completed an impressive modernization, diversification, and build-up of its forces, puts nuclear weapons at the very center of its military and political strategy and even envisions their limited use for coercive purposes.[60]

North Korea, meanwhile, has managed to build, test, and deploy operational nuclear forces despite decades of U.S.-led efforts to dissuade it from doing so, and Pyongyang now insists that its force is not only for deterrence, but also to achieve "final victory."[61] Iran, which is now at the nuclear brink and has never hidden its revolutionary agenda (especially vis-à-vis Israel, as recent developments have shown), further complicates that landscape.

China's nuclear build-up, therefore, adds immense complexity to this already heavily charged security environment. But it does more than just that: it also transforms that environment.

While China and Russia diverge on many topics (and China, as mentioned, does not welcome Russia's nuclear saber-rattling), they do agree on the need to coordinate their activities and even cooperate to counter the United States and its allies. In that spirit, they have strengthened their bilateral relationship considerably, so much so that they labeled it a "friendship without limits" shortly before Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.[62] Since then, the China-Russia partnership has advanced rapidly at the political, economic, and security levels, raising fundamental questions for the United States because Russia is a longtime nuclear peer and China is now emerging as a nuclear near-peer.

Some of these questions include the following: in a war, could China and Russia conspire to compel the United States to split its attention and resources between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic, using nuclear threats? Could they coordinate to divide the United States from its allies? In a crisis or in peacetime, could China and Russia cooperate to shape the information environment to their advantage? Or could either seek to advance its interests, including through the use of force, if and when the United States is engaged in a crisis or war with the other?

---

[60] Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century and On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue.* See also William Alberque, "Russian Military Thought and Doctrine Related to Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons: Change and Continuity," The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Jan. 22, 2024.

[61] Robert E. Kelly, "Why North Korea may use nuclear weapons first, and why current U.S. policy toward Pyongyang is unsustainable," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* Nov. 21, 2023.

[62] "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," Feb 4, 2022.

Looking to the future, there are also concerns that China and Russia could collude, individually or together, with North Korea and perhaps even Iran to present more difficulties to the United States and its allies, both in peacetime and in time of crisis or war.

China's rise as a major nuclear-armed power thus not only adds to the complexity of the nuclear landscape but, because of the apparent strategic convergence between China and Russia (which, tomorrow, could include others), it also turns that landscape into one that now features roughly two opposing "nuclear blocs": one dominated by China and Russia against the other led by the United States and its allies.

At this point, it is important to note that even in the (unlikely) event of a U.S.-China détente or dialogue, there would be no guarantee of finding a solution to "the build-up problem" because Beijing is driven by more than just the United States. In private discussions, Chinese strategists confess that, for a few years, China has also been motivated increasingly by nuclear developments in India, and the recent deterioration of China-India relations has probably reinforced this motivation.[63] China, meanwhile, is interested in strengthening its partnership with Russia, but it would be foolish to assume that Beijing does not consider Moscow when it does defense planning, given their complicated relationship. The same goes for North Korea. Finally, analysts have explained that domestic and organizational factors may be driving China's build-up as well.[64]

Accordingly, the advent of a more nuclearized and more divided and antagonistic world partly due to China's nuclear build-up is both an emerging and, most probably, an enduring reality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

Why It Impacts Europe

There is no question that China's emergence as a major nuclear-armed power is first and foremost a problem for the Indo-Pacific, not Euro-Atlantic. Because China's worldview is primarily (at least for now) centered on the Indo-Pacific, especially East Asia, the Chinese nuclear build-up is of primary interest to U.S. Indo-Pacific allies and partners, with Taiwan in the lead given, as mentioned earlier, Beijing's stated commitment on multiple occasions that it wants to reunify the island with mainland China, including through the use of force if necessary.

---

[63] Santoro and Gromoll, p. 16.

[64] For a detailed analysis of the drivers of China's nuclear build-up, see David C. Logan and Phillip Saunders, "Discerning the Drivers of China's Nuclear Force Development: Models, Indicators, and Data," *China Strategic Perspectives,* no. 18, Jul. 2023.

President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jingping
Source: WikiMedia Commons

But it would be wrong to assume that China's nuclear build-up does not impact Europe, or that it does not impact it greatly. On at least two accounts, the build-up and its consequences directly affect European countries.

First, most European countries are U.S. allies (primarily through NATO membership) and, therefore, have mutual defense commitments with the United States, as well as with one another and Canada. Article 5 of the NATO treaty states that an armed attack against one NATO member is an attack against all. So, in the event of an armed conflict between the United States and China, even though such a contingency would likely fall outside NATO's traditional scope (i.e., the Euro-Atlantic), it is difficult to imagine that the Alliance could just stand still, especially given that there are historical precedents for NATO's engagement "out of area." The United States, at a minimum, would want NATO to do something. European countries (and Canada), then, would be under pressure to get involved in the conflict in some fashion, which unavoidably would take place under a long nuclear shadow, with all the risks and challenges that such an endeavor entails, including possible retaliation from China, military or otherwise.

Of note, the North Atlantic Treaty consists of more than just mutual defense commitments as laid out in Article 5: it also pledges its signatories "to safeguard the freedom, common heritage, and civilization of their peoples, founded on the

principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law."[65] That language suggests that, in theory, NATO allies also have a responsibility for action short of an armed attack given that China threatens many of these principles.

Second, the global nuclear instability resulting from the Chinese nuclear build-up will impact Europe greatly. European countries will suffer, as any other country, from that instability in indirect ways, simply because the world will more divided and more tense, impacting all areas of international relations. But European countries will also suffer directly. The China-Russia friendship without limits in the context of China moving toward major-nuclear-power status affects Europe's security calculations deeply because it impacts, or will impact, the balance of power on the continent by creating new, hard problems. Not only does this development add a "China nuclear dimension" to an already acute nuclear threat from Russia – so, it makes a big nuclear problem bigger, but it also raises fundamental questions about the ability and willingness of the United States, in that new power configuration, to continue to act effectively as Europe's primary security guarantor and, therefore, about the potential (or new) role European countries should play to defend the regional security order.

The impact of China's nuclear build-up on both the U.S.-China and the global nuclear balance is thus – should be – of direct concern to Europe.

How It Impacts Europe

Having examined why China reaching major-nuclear-power status matters, or should matter, to Europe, let us now delve into the "how" question: how, specifically, does this development affect European countries?

This development affects European countries along the entire conflict spectrum, i.e., in peacetime, crisis, and war.

In peacetime, European countries are now forced to ask themselves whether the current regional deterrence architecture is still fit for purpose, or whether Europe is, or will soon be, at a nuclear disadvantage. That raises the question of what they can and should do, and according to what timelines, to adapt that architecture in partnership with the United States (and Canada). This question is especially relevant given the apparent demise of nuclear arms control, and arms control more generally: except for the U.S.-Russia New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which is set to expire in February 2026 and, at present, has no prospect for a replacement, most other arms control agreements have now vanished. China has also notoriously declined to participate in such agreements, despite repeated invitations (mostly from

[65] The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington, April 4, 1949, accessible on the NATO website at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm

the United States) to do so. As a result, the prospects for any progress on the arms control front, including in the sole U.S.-Russia context, are bleak.

European countries are also forced to ask themselves whether they should expect, now or in the foreseeable future, lower-level coercion or even outright aggression from China, Russia, or the China-Russia bloc because Beijing and Moscow might assume that they can get away with such actions given their growing nuclear strength and perhaps a presumed nuclear superiority. Another fundamental question is the division of labor between European countries and the United States, and whether, or how much, some rebalancing of deterrence (and arms control) roles and responsibilities is in order as the balance of power is shifting in unfavorable ways, and as Washington will likely have to do considerably more in the Indo-Pacific.

In a crisis or a war, European countries are also faced with tough questions. One is what to do to either prevent or defend against and defeat aggression in a context in which Russia and China would join forces against the West. Another question is what European countries should do to either prevent or defend against and defeat opportunistic aggression by Russia against them in the event of a crisis or a war with China in the Indo-Pacific that requires much, perhaps most, of the United States' focus, capabilities, and resources; a related point is the role of European countries themselves in a crisis or war in the Indo-Pacific involving China. Yet another question is what European countries should do to navigate, defend against, and win in the event of a simultaneous or quasi-simultaneous crisis or war with Russia in the Euro-Atlantic and China in the Indo-Pacific, which would stretch the United States considerably.

In all three cases, the question of how to manage escalation, especially to the nuclear level, and the question of how to restore deterrence come up. Finally, the question of the division of labor between European countries on the one hand, and the United States on the other is as essential in time of crisis or war as it is in peacetime.

European countries, therefore, are – will be – impacted significantly and in fundamental ways by China's pursuit of major-nuclear-power status.

The European Response, So Far

European countries have, of late, recognized the multidimensional problem that China poses and taken some actions, despite their dependence on the Chinese economy. But they have not formulated a response to the specific challenges presented by the Chinese nuclear build-up.

EUROPE'S RESPONSE TO THE MOUNTING CHINA CHALLENGE

The EU Response

Until the 2010s, Europe had a flourishing relationship with China. Europe only began to question that relationship after a series of key events, including the acquisition of the German firm KUKA by the Midea Group (a Chinese manufacturer), revelations about the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Beijing's takeover of Hong Kong, and Chinese actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Europeans also realized that China was changing fast under Xi Jinping's rule, not for the better.

Europe, then, took action. The European Parliament froze the ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, a trade deal to liberalize investment opportunities and promote fair competition between the European Union and China. After decades of Chinese investments in infrastructures in Europe, the European Union also set up an investment screening framework to evaluate investments, and it activated a mechanism to enhance coordination and cooperation between the Commission and Member States. Moreover, the European Union introduced a "5G toolbox" to address security risks in 5G networks and reduce reliance on Chinese suppliers.

Europeans, plainly, have sought to "de-weaponize" critical hubs and to regain strategic autonomy. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has labelled it "de-risking."[66] In that context, the European Union also released a more general European Economic Strategy to enhance resilience and counter coercion.[67]

---

[66] "Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre," Brussels, Mar. 30, 2023.

[67] "An EU Approach to Enhance Economic Security," European Commission, Jun. 20, 2023.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission
Source: WikiMedia Commons

Beyond that, Europe has become interested in, and worried about, China's geopolitical ambitions. The European Union's External Action Service, for instance, said the following: "For the EU, Taiwan is a reliable and valued like-minded partner in Asia. The EU and Taiwan share common values, such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. We are both committed to upholding multilateralism and the rules-based international order."[68] Growing rapprochement between China and Russia has also raised red flags. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell called the China-Russia Joint Statement issued before Russia's invasion of Ukraine "an act of defiance" by countries that had written a "revisionist manifesto."[69] China's embrace of Russia despite, or because of, the invasion has strengthened that sentiment.

Europe has remained both dependent and divided about China, however. In 2020, China became the European Union's largest trading partner, overtaking the United States, and Europe is dependent on Beijing for pharmaceutical ingredients, critical components, and raw materials for its green and digital transitions. Moreover, Europeans do not have common positions on Huawei's role in European 5G networks, Chinese investments, or Taiwan and the South China Sea, with some favoring strategic autonomy and economic sovereignty, while others do not.

[68] European Economic and Trade Office in Taiwan, "The European Union and Taiwan," Jul. 26, 2021.
[69] "Opening statement by HR/VP Josep Borrell," Munich Security Conference, Feb. 20, 2022.

Europeans also believe that "dealing with China" is crucial to address global challenges, such as climate change or nuclear proliferation. So, the EU-China Strategic Dialogue has remained active.

In these circumstances, the European Union's cautious characterization of China as "a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interest, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance" makes perfect sense.[70]

The NATO Response

NATO's interest in China developed in the context of this evolving European approach and the U.S. designation of China as "long-term strategic competitor" in the late 2010s.[71] In 2019, for instance, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas noted that "China is set to become the subject of the 21st century on both sides of the Atlantic," it "is a challenge on almost every topic," and "it is important to gain a better understanding of what that implies for NATO."[72]

NATO identified China as a key topic for the first time later that year, with the Allies recognizing that "China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance."[73] That language triggered a debate within NATO, with some (notably the United States) pushing the Alliance to think about the implications of China's rise, and others pushing back to maintain Chinese cooperation and prevent geographic overreach; critics have zoomed in on the latter point since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, given the need to prioritize to the Eastern European Flank.

Then came "NATO 2030," a consultation process to reflect on the Alliance's direction that included a report by independent experts. That report, which is not an official NATO document, rings the alarm bell about the "simultaneous geopolitical and ideological challenges posed by Russia and China" and urges NATO to "remain the platform around which the Alliance organizes itself for an era of truly global challenges."[74] While recognizing the centrality of the Euro-Atlantic for NATO, the report thus also underscores the Alliance's political

[70] European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council, "EU-China – A strategic outlook," Mar. 12, 2019, p. 1.

[71] *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018).

[72] Quoted in Ishaan Tharoor, "Is China NATO's new adversary?" *Washington Post,* Dec. 3, 2019.

[73] "Brussels Summit Communique," Brussels, Jun. 14, 2021.

[74] "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General, Brussels, Nov. 25, 2020, p. 10.

nature and global scope, setting the stage for more substantial work on China. In that spirit, the report recommends stronger cooperation with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, NATO's Indo-Pacific partners, or IP4.

NATO has since devoted more attention to China. The 2021 Brussels Summit Communique talks about "China's stated ambitions and assertive behavior," which poses "systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security."[75] The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept elaborates on these challenges, highlighting Beijing's attempts, in partnership with Moscow, to upend the international order, and calls for greater allied cooperation to respond.[76] The 2023 Vilnius Summit Communique reiterates these concerns and calls on China to "refrain from providing any lethal aid to Russia" for its war in Ukraine.[77]

Recently, then, NATO has paid more attention to China and the challenges it poses to the Euro-Atlantic, both by itself and through its ties with Russia. NATO has also begun to appreciate that the Euro-Atlantic would suffer from instability or, worse, a war in the Indo-Pacific, and it has thus upgraded its partnerships with the IP4; the latter also attended the 2022 Madrid and 2023 Vilnius Summits – the first times they had done so.

NATO's response to the China problem is in its infancy, however. Right now, it exists more in words than in deeds. It is also tentative: NATO deplores Chinese actions, promises responses, but, as the European Union, praises the benefits of dialogue; the new Strategic Concept, for instance, says that the Allies "remain open to constructive engagement with the PRC."[78] Finally, and relatedly, problems have emerged already among NATO allies. While the allies agree that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are increasingly intertwined, there is resistance by some against framing China as an adversary and engaging the Indo-Pacific too forcefully. France's refusal to back a plan to open a NATO liaison office in Tokyo should be understood in that light.

Still, Europe's rising interest in China and the actions it has undertaken so far have not gone unnoticed. China has criticized both the European Union and NATO, accusing especially the latter of embracing a "Cold War mentality" with a "zero-sum mindset."[79]

---

[75] "Brussels Summit Communique."

[76] "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept," Brussels, Jun. 29, 2022.

[77] "Vilnius Summit Communique," Vilnius, Jul. 11, 2023.

[78] "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept."

[79] "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference," Beijing, Jul. 12, 2023.

TO BE DETERMINED: A EUROPEAN RESPONSE TO NUCLEAR CHINA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

A Problem within a Bigger Problem

If the United States (slowly) became concerned about nuclear China from the late 1990s, it was not before the revelations of 2021 about the scope and scale of Chinese nuclear modernization that Europe started paying serious attention to this problem. Some European countries raised it in their individual strategic documents; in its 2022 National Strategic Review, for instance, France talks about "the greater quantity and quality of China's nuclear arsenal."[80] The European Union, too, became vocal, although not loudly at first, limiting itself to calling on China to "actively contribute" to arms control, disarmament, and risk reduction processes without mentioning its build-up.[81] Only later did the European Union begin to talk openly about "the rapid and extensive build-up of China's nuclear arsenal."[82]
NATO, for its part, began discussing Chinese nuclear activities in the 2021 Brussels Summit Communique, using very explicit language, and also warning of the China-Russia rapprochement:

> China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal with more warheads and a larger number of sophisticated delivery systems to establish a nuclear triad. It is opaque in implementing its military modernization and its publicly declared military-civil fusion strategy. It is also cooperating militarily with Russia, including through participation in Russian exercises in the Euro-Atlantic area. We remain concerned with China's frequent lack of transparency and use of disinformation. We call on China to uphold its international commitments and to act responsibly in the international system, including in the space, cyber, and maritime domains, in keeping with its role as a major power.[83]

That language, however, does not single out the nuclear problem. Rather, it identifies it as one problem within a bigger problem: the emergence of a powerful China seemingly committed to challenging key international rules and norms with all the tools at its disposal.

A year earlier, the NATO 2030 report had taken a similar approach. It mentioned that China is developing "a larger nuclear arsenal" only in the

[80] National strategic review 2022 (Paris: Republique francaise, 2022), p. 12.

[81] "EU Statement – 10th Review Conference on the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Main Committee," New York, Aug. 4, 2022.

[82] "Statement on Nuclear Risk Reduction – Panel Discussion Conference on Disarmament," Geneva, Mar. 23, 2023.

[83] "Brussels Summit Communique."

context of a description of the myriad of economic and strategic challenges that the country poses, and its China-specific recommendations had nothing to say about dealing with the Chinese nuclear build-up.[84] NATO documents have read the same since, be it the new Strategic Concept or the Vilnius Summit Communique, even though they detail allied concerns slightly more. For instance, the Vilnius Communique stresses that NATO allies "oppose any attempt to produce or support the production of plutonium for military programs under the guise of civilian programs [...]" – the first time such an accusation is leveled.[85]

While Europe identifies the Chinese nuclear build-up as a problem, it thus only sees it as one of many that China poses. To be sure, the same is true of the United States: when it comes to the China challenge, the build-up is not the focus of the U.S. national security community. Still, the build-up has received considerably more attention in the United States than in Europe.

Lack of Focus (and Action)

In addition to approaching the Chinese nuclear build-up as one problem within the bigger "China problem," European countries, be it individually or via the European Union or NATO, have done little besides talking about the build-up and identifying it as a challenge. In other words, the issue has made its way into European strategic documents, but, so far, few focused actions have been taken to deal with it.

Reading between the lines, the suggestion is also that Europe sees the Chinese nuclear build-up primarily as a future problem, and as one that needs – or will need – to be addressed through engagement of China. Consider, for instance, the remarks made by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the 18th Annual NATO Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament, and Weapons of Mass Destruction Nonproliferation in April 2023:

> In the longer term, we need to re-think and adapt our approach to a more dangerous and competitive world. And that means engaging with China. Which is estimated to have 1,500 warheads by 2035. As a global power, China has global responsibilities. And Beijing too would benefit from the increased transparency, predictability, and security of arms control agreements. NATO is a unique platform where we engage with China and the wider international community for our mutual benefit.[86]

---

[84] See "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," notably pp. 27-28.

[85] "Vilnius Summit Communique."

[86] "Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the 18th Annual NATO Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament, and Weapons of Mass Destruction Nonproliferation," Brussels, Apr. 18, 2023.

Put differently, there is little, if any, indication that European countries have given serious thought to whether their deterrence and defense architecture is fit for purpose to deal with China's nuclear build-up and, for that matter, to the associated consequences of China-Russia rapprochement. If so, then presumably little thinking has gone into possible crisis and war scenarios linked to that problem.

One caveat: NATO's new Strategic Concept stresses that the allies "will individually and collectively deliver the *full* range of forces, capabilities, plans, resources, assets, and infrastructure needed for deterrence and defense, including for high-intensity, multi-domain warfighting against *nuclear-armed peer-competitors*" (emphases added).[87] That language, which the latest NATO Summit Communique repeats, suggests that the Alliance will now focus its forces not just on Russia but, rather, on both Russia *and* China.

Still, as of mid-2024, Europe had little to show in terms of a response to the specific problem posed by the Chinese nuclear build-up.
To be fair, so did the United States, even though Washington had spent more time working or, rather, considering the implications of that problem. The final report of the 2023 bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States makes that perfectly clear, contending that the looming strategic environment that will include two antagonistic nuclear peers (Russia and China) against the United States is no less than "an existential challenge for which the United States is ill-prepared, unless its leaders make decisions now to adjust the U.S. strategic posture."[88]

[87] "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept."

[88] America's Strategic Posture, p. vii.

Looking Ahead: Next Steps for Europe

In light of China's evolving approach to nuclear weapons, the implications of its recent decision to opt for major-nuclear-power status, and the European response so far, let us now turn to the next and final logical question: what more should Europe do?

At the most general level, Europe should be clear-eyed – and clear – about its goals and priorities to address that problem. On that basis, it should work hard to help strengthen deterrence and defense and, simultaneously, advance a forward-leaning diplomatic agenda.

SET CLEAR GOALS AND PRIORITIES

Remain Laser-Focused on Nuclear Russia

Even as the "China nuclear problem" is becoming more severe, Europe should be clear that its focus is – and will remain – Russia. There should be no question that Europe will spend most of its attention and resources to help better deter and, if necessary, defend against Russia as well as try to advance arms control or risk reduction measures wherever and whenever possible to address that problem. For good reasons: Russian nuclear behavior and capabilities pose a direct and significant threat to the European continent, and there is no sign that this threat will go away any time soon, on the contrary.[89]

A European focus on Russia is also beneficial to the United States. Quite simply, Washington needs Europe to take good – better – care of European security both because the continent is under threat and because there are now rising nuclear dangers in the Indo-Pacific (primarily coming from China, but also North Korea), which will require greater U.S. focus. So, the best way Europe can help the United States to address that problem is by doing considerably more to maintain its own security, notably vis-à-vis Russia.

Know Your Place and Role vis-à-vis Nuclear China

Europe does have a role to play vis-à-vis nuclear China, however. Not just because security is "indivisible" and bad developments in one region will likely affect other regions, but because of alliance commitments with the

[89] See, in particular, the recent report by Alberque, "Russian Military Thought and Doctrine Related to Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons: Change and Continuity," referenced earlier.

United States and, perhaps more importantly, because European security will suffer directly from that problem, notably due to growing Russia-China rapprochement. Nuclear China, then, is a problem that Europe cannot – and should not – ignore, even if it comes after Russia on the priority list. In practice, it means that Europe should take some actions to address nuclear China, but that these actions should not be front and center, be it to help improve deterrence and defense or to propose and negotiate a restraint agenda. In other words, leadership for action vis-à-vis nuclear China should come from the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies, with Europe playing a secondary or support role.

Still, that role is important, for the reasons just mentioned and, some Europeans would argue, also because European actions to address nuclear China may help ensure that the United States remains interested in Europe and involved in European affairs. Europeans worry that some in the United States have grown disinterested in guaranteeing European security, with a fraction even advocating a U.S. withdrawal from NATO, and that they would rather redirect U.S. efforts towards addressing China and Indo-Pacific security. The idea, then, is that giving a little bit of an Indo-Pacific angle to NATO could help enhance the organization's relevance in U.S. eyes. It would, the argument goes, help "keep the Americans in."

IMPROVE DETERRENCE AND DEFENSE

There are three ways Europe can – and should – contribute to strengthening deterrence of, and defense against, nuclear China: by increasing its overall knowledge of nuclear China, and of China-Russia strategic cooperation, and by showcasing it; by fostering more ambitious collective defense work with its Indo-Pacific partners; and by taking a range of measures and actions in critical security areas that play to its strengths.

Get Smarter about Nuclear China and China-Russia Cooperation, and Show It

For starters, Europe should seek to get smarter about nuclear China and China-Russia strategic cooperation. To do so, it should conduct more regular and more in-depth joint information-sharing and risk assessments. The purpose is obvious: Europeans need to know as much as possible (and hopefully agree on) what China is doing and what China and Russia are doing jointly, and they need to think more systematically about the implications for European security as a first step towards crafting appropriate responses.

Europeans should do this work among themselves, and they should also do it in collaboration with their Indo-Pacific partners. In that spirit, some have

suggested that NATO establish a small military headquarters element in or near the Indo-Pacific (possibly at the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii) to facilitate information exchange and coordination of exercises and activities by allies in the region.[90] Others have proposed the establishment of a NATO-certified Center of Excellence in the Indo-Pacific and the equivalent of the NATO Defense College in Rome to facilitate cooperation between NATO allies and Indo-Pacific partners on shared priorities and to help develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges posed by China and China-Russia rapprochement (in the nuclear domain and beyond) as well as possible responses.[91] These are all good proposals, among many others, that NATO allies should consider seriously.

This work will not only help Europeans (and Asians) get smarter about these problems and their possible solutions, but if given proper visibility, it will also contribute, in and of itself, to strengthening deterrence and defense. For instance, Beijing did not miss NATO's attempt to open a liaison office in Tokyo, with one former Chinese senior military officer criticizing the move and asking why the Alliance seems willing to "expand" into the Indo-Pacific.[92]

Ramp Up Defense Cooperation with Indo-Pacific Partners

Enhancing practical cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners beyond assessing problems and thinking about possible solutions is also essential. In other words, Europe should seek to "do" considerably more with its Indo-Pacific partners when it comes to deterrence and defense.

Step number one is to define what that cooperation should be. Planning for military action by NATO in the event of a strategic contingency with China in the Indo-Pacific is probably off the table, yet that does not mean that the Alliance would not play a role. For instance, NATO would likely send weapons and ammunition, voice signals of support, and some European countries (France and the United Kingdom) would also likely deploy military assets to the region, either to prevent escalation or restore deterrence. Moreover, Europeans would likely impose economic sanctions and seek to safeguard, and perhaps engage in indirect combat in, the new domains of cyberspace and outer space and, tomorrow, use technologies such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing to that effect. During such a conflict, Europeans would also have to worry about the possibility of

---

[90] Ian Brzezinski, *NATO's role in a transatlantic strategy on China* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2020).

[91] Gerald E. Connolly, *The rise of China: Implications for global and Euro-Atlantic security* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2020), p. 25.

92 Comment made at the Asia Peace Conference, Tokyo, Jul. 19, 2023, https://www.genron-npo.net/en/pp/archives/5627.html

opportunistic aggression by Russia on the European continent and would thus want to discuss and operationalize division-of-labor options with their Indo-Pacific partners.

These considerations (and others) should drive more advanced cross-regional defense cooperation. To be fair, stronger defense cooperation is already on its way. NATO allies have strengthened their ties with the IP4, for instance, and there has been a considerable amount of work to better divide labor between them. Of late, for instance, NATO and Japan have been working together on new technologies, starting with cyber as the first area of cooperation in the NATO Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program, and Japan has also joined NATO's annual cyber exercises since 2021.[93] Going forward, NATO-Japan cooperation will focus on outer space, maritime security, and disinformation. There is also the potential for cooperation between the United States and allies in Europe and Asia to strengthen their defense industrial base, which has revealed its limits in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Deeper cooperation is needed, however, notably when it comes to dealing with strategic conflict and its implications. So far, NATO allies and their Indo-Pacific partners have thought little about cooperation to better deter and defend against strategic military engagement with China or the China-Russia "bloc."

Expanding defense cooperation beyond the sole IP4 is also critical. As the NATO 2030 report recommends, NATO allies should consider engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which consists of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.[94] Engagement of India specifically should also be on the table, as should engagement of other initiatives, such as the Australia-France-India forum or the Australia-United Kingdom-United States security arrangement, dubbed AUKUS. The goal should be to knit a dense(r) web of like-minded partners who, with an eye to China, are committed to strengthening and making collective deterrence and defense work.

Play to Your Strengths in Critical Areas

Finally, Europe can – and should – help strengthen deterrence of, and defense against, nuclear China by taking action in a range of critical areas where it exercises power, influence, and therefore potential control.

Europe, as mentioned, should do more to improve deterrence and defense but its actions in the military domain vis-à-vis China or the China-Russia bloc are limited. In the areas of economic and technology policy or even foreign

[93] For details, visit https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50336.htm

[94] "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," p. 60.

investments, however, Europe has significant power and influence and should thus be prepared to flex that muscle either in the lead-up to or in the event of strategic conflict.

Over the past few years, Europe has taken steps in that direction already, but it is still far from having developed anything that resembles what some have labelled "economic deterrence" or sometimes "collective resilience," i.e., a strategy promising a multilateral response that strikes China hard and imposes pain in the trade or technology sectors, such as the imposition of economic sanctions and the denial of strategic items, products, or services.[95] So far, Europe has adopted piecemeal de-risking measures solely aimed at minimizing its vulnerability to China, such as trade diversion, reshoring, or supply chain resilience.

Europe should develop such a strategy. To do so effectively, it would need to foster cooperation between the European Union, which governs, for lack of better terms, the continent's politico-economic regulatory sphere, and NATO, which focuses on security and defense issues. Strong EU-NATO cooperation would help develop the building blocks of that strategy and operationalize it. In turn, Europe could enlist other non-European countries, beginning with its Indo-Pacific partners. If designed and implemented properly, that strategy would have the potential to play an important support role to the deterrence of, or even the defense against, either nuclear China or the China-Russia bloc.

PURSUE FORWARD-LEANING DIPLOMACY

Simultaneously, Europe should advance an active diplomatic agenda that consists in highlighting systematically its concerns about (and proposing solutions to address) Beijing's nuclear build-up in its interactions with high-level Chinese officials; proposing and sponsoring expert-level work with Chinese on nuclear weapons and related issues; and, more broadly, championing arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament wherever and whenever possible.

Elevate the Topic in Top-Level Engagement

Europe should make China's nuclear build-up and the importance and need for arms control and risk reduction a regular talking point in its interactions with high-level Chinese officials. This is important – essential – because decision-making power is increasingly concentrated at the top under Xi Jinping's rule, so active engagement at that level could help drive change; it is more likely to yield results than a bottom-up approach.

---

[95] See Victor D. Cha, "Collective Resilience: Deterring China's Weaponization of Economic Interdependence," *International Security,* vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 91-124.

Europe is well-positioned to do this because it has more direct access to Chinese officials than the United States. As mentioned, individual European countries have woken up to the China challenge, but they continue to believe that "dealing with China" is paramount, and the EU-China Strategic Dialogue is still active.

Going forward, NATO engagement of China would be beneficial. Some have proposed the establishment of a NATO-China council that would include annual or semiannual meetings at the North-Atlantic-Council level to develop a dialogue centered on confidence-building measures, crisis management mechanisms, and incident management procedures.[96] This dialogue could also explore other areas of cooperation, such as the security implications of climate change or pandemic management, and it would be a good platform to discuss the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Propose Expert-Level Initiatives

Europe should propose (and sponsor) expert-level work on nuclear weapons with Chinese in at least in three areas: strategic stability, risk reduction, and arms control. These dialogues should begin at the track-2 level and gradually morph into track-1.5 forms of engagement.[97]

Strategic stability. Beijing wants the United States to acknowledge publicly that it is in a mutually vulnerable relationship with China, and it wants the United States to adopt a no-first-use policy as a basis of U.S.-China strategic stability.[98] U.S. Indo-Pacific allies, however, do not want the United States to do either, fearing that honoring such requests could undermine U.S. extended deterrence and lead Beijing to be more assertive, even aggressive, at the conventional level, according to the logic of the stability-instability paradox, described earlier. Using their Cold War experience, during which they were in a similar situation vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union, Europeans should explain to Chinese that Indo-Pacific countries' concerns are genuine. They should further recommend that China address these concerns if it hopes to convince the United States to consider making a vulnerability acknowledgement (or embracing a no-first-use policy).

---

[96] Hans Binnenduk and Daniel S. Hamilton, *Implementing NATO's Strategic Concept on China* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2023), p. 16.

[97] Generally, track-2 dialogue involves unofficial engagement between academics and researchers between two or several countries. When government officials (e.g., diplomats, military officers, or officials from other bureaucracies) also attend in their private capacity, such engagement is called track-1.5. Both track-2 and track-1.5 work are different from official government-to-government, i.e., track-1, work.

[98] For a study on this question, see David Santoro (ed.), "U.S.-China Mutual Vulnerability – Perspectives on the Debate," *Issues & Insights,* vol. 22, SR2, May 2022.

Risk reduction. China has said repeatedly that it wants to discuss risk reduction and especially find ways to manage new, emerging technologies in the context of an escalating crisis or war with the United States. Some U.S.-China expert-level work is emerging in that space, but the deterioration of the bilateral relationship has made these discussions difficult. There has been little progress, for instance, when it comes to dealing with China's development and deployment of conventional-nuclear dual-capable ballistic missile capabilities, which many experts consider dangerously destabilizing. Europeans should leverage their decades-long expertise and experience in this area and engage in in-depth discussions with Chinese on these thorny questions. They would be in a better position than Americans to make headway or, at a minimum, to complement their work because they have better relations with China.

Arms control. There are two reasons why China has rejected arms control so far: Beijing has said that "the conditions are not ripe," i.e., that its arsenal is too small compared to the U.S. and Russian arsenals, and it has argued that it lacks expertise and experience to "do" arms control, notably when it comes to verification and monitoring. Europe should sponsor expert-level dialogues to address these issues. Of late, several scholars have made sophisticated proposals to address the asymmetry of forces between the United States, Russia, and China, which include asymmetric arms control options.[99] There have been other, more general proposals as well, including banning the deployment of space-based missile defense interceptors or the establishment of a U.S.-China fissile material management system to build confidence that civilian nuclear facilities would not assist with the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapon programs.[100] European-sponsored dialogues should explore these proposals in depth and flesh out their benefits, costs, and risks, and Europe should sponsor arms control training workshops for Chinese experts and officials, notably on deterrence, risk reduction, and verification akin to those CNS has conducted for junior and mid-level NATO officials with support from Germany. Engaging in such discussions with, and learning from, Europeans would be much more politically acceptable from Beijing's perspective and would contribute to socializing Chinese with arms control options as well as to building arms control capacity.

---

[99] See, for instance, Ulrich Kuhn (ed.), *Trilateral Arms Control? Perspectives from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (Hamburg: IFSH Research Report #002, 2020).

[100] James M. Acton, Thomas Macdonald, and Pranay Vaddi, "Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control: A Comprehensive Approach," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, Dec. 2021.

Champion Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament

Finally, Europe should make a point of championing arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament wherever and whenever possible.

Once overwhelmingly accepted by the community of nations, these processes have fallen out of fashion and are no longer the priorities of the major powers and others, and it has not been a priority for China. At present, it is especially unlikely to see good prospects for the negotiation of formal, legally binding, and verifiable treaties in these areas. On the contrary, the recent trend has been the abandonment of many such treaties, notably in the U.S.-Russia context.

Europe should strive to be the voice of reason and remind the world that, more often than not, arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament help enhance stability. Europe should thus be active in international fora to salvage existing agreements, and it should think creatively about how to make headway to conclude new ones. For instance, if formal, legally binding, and verifiable treaties are not in the cards at present, then Europe should push for "softer" forms of instruments, including the development of rules of the road to shape norms and behaviors in the new domains of cyberspace and outer space. China might very well resist these engagements as well, but the odds of a breakthrough there are significantly higher than success in "traditional" arms control.

Europe should also take China at its word. Beijing regularly stresses that it prioritizes multilateral diplomacy but, so far, for instance, it has steered clear of embracing the confidence-building measures of the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation, despite possessing one of the most active and most diverse missile development programs in the world. Europe should pressure Beijing to turn its words into deeds. France and the United Kingdom should also champion the proposal for a P-5 missile notification mechanism proposed by U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.[101]

Europe, in sum, has a clear role to play to deal with nuclear China. That role is important and, if properly played, would help ameliorate current tensions and a looming crisis.

[101] This is one of many recommendations for action on missiles in the region in David Santoro and Miles Pomper (eds.), "Charting a Roadmap for Multiparty Confidence and Security Building Measures, Risk Reduction, and Arms Control in the Indo-Pacific," *Issues & Insights,* Nov. 2023.

About the Authors

Rose Gottemoeller is Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies and Lecturer at Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies and its Center for International Security and Cooperation. Before joining Stanford, Gottemoeller was the deputy secretary general of NATO from 2016 to 2019, where she helped to drive forward NATO's adaptation to new security challenges in Europe and in the fight against terrorism. Prior to NATO, she served for nearly five years as US undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, advising the secretary of state on arms control, nonproliferation, and political-military affairs. While assistant secretary of state for arms control, verification, and compliance in 2009 and 2010, she was the chief US negotiator of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia.

David Santoro is President and CEO of the Honolulu-based Pacific Forum. He specializes in deterrence, arms control, and nonproliferation, as well as geostrategy in Asia and Europe. Santoro's current interests focus on great-power dynamics and US alliances, particularly the role of China in an era of nuclear multipolarity. In 2021, he published *U.S.-China Nuclear Relations – The Impact of Strategic Triangles* with Lynne Rienner. He also runs numerous track-2 and track-1.5 strategic dialogues, notably in the Indo-Pacific. Before joining the Pacific Forum, Santoro worked on strategic issues in France, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In 2010, he was also a Visiting Fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation and, in 2010-2011, he was a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London.

nonproliferation.org

Middlebury Institute *of*
International Studies at Monterey
James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies