

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## China's Strategic Capabilities and Intent

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Over the past year, the Chinese have been steadily improving their strategic military capabilities. It is becoming clearer that China is developing and building capabilities to have an impact beyond Asia; indeed, recent developments indicate that China is preparing a force meant to challenge and deter the United States.

**China's Nuclear Policy: Official and Otherwise.** Since first testing a nuclear weapon in 1964, China has held an official “no first use” policy regarding nuclear weapons, meaning that Beijing would use nuclear weapons only in response to a nuclear attack. But over the years, China's strategic forces have expanded and improved.

Moreover, China has become more aggressive both in its rhetoric and in its military responses to territorial disputes. In April, the Chinese Ministry of Defense released a regular white paper<sup>1</sup> on China's official defense policy that did not mention the “no first use” policy. Official government spokesmen have publicly stated that the long-standing policy has not changed, but the omission is worth noting.

Additionally, Chinese rhetoric involving nuclear weapons has become increasingly more provocative. In October, Chinese government-run media reports

outlined various hypothetical plans regarding how China would attack the United States with nuclear weapons. It is not a surprise that China would be war-gaming scenarios, but what is worth noting is that the government decided to make such plans public and in such a provocative and detailed manner.

While the Pentagon has reported and military spokesmen have testified to Chinese advancement, it is also true that those same officials have admitted to having only limited knowledge of Chinese missile and nuclear weapons capabilities due to Beijing's lack of transparency. China's Second Artillery has built more than 3,000 miles of tunnels known as “The Underground Great Wall.” More elements of China's missile and nuclear programs are likely concealed within those tunnels.<sup>2</sup>

**Recent Developments in Capabilities.** The U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission has confirmed China's continued investment in its military.<sup>3</sup> China's official public defense budget for 2013 rose 10.7 percent over 2012. This, according to the commission, is “signaling the new leadership's support for the [Chinese military's] ongoing modernization efforts. China's official annual defense budget now has increased for 22 consecutive years and more than doubled since 2006. The Institute of International Strategic Studies assesses China's actual defense spending is 40 to 50 percent higher than the official figure.”

The Department of Defense *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013*<sup>4</sup> has reported that a significant element of China's military modernization program is dedicated to its ballistic mis-

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sile fleet. Indeed, China has the largest and most active ballistic missile program in the world.

The Chinese are working on a diverse array of offensive missile capabilities, including submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The Pentagon report states that China currently has three operational nuclear-missile submarines (known as SSBNs) and that it could add five more to the fleet by the end of the next decade before it begins its next-generation SSBN. Each of these submarines is equipped with 12 missile launch tubes. The National Air and Space Intelligence Center has revealed that China will soon be patrolling with a new SLBM, which would “for the first time, allow Chinese SSBNs to target portions of the United States from operating areas located near the Chinese coast.”<sup>5</sup>

The Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) fleet has also seen steady investment and improvement. Not only is China investing in new ICBMs; it is also ensuring that they are capable of carrying multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles.

The U.S.–China Commission report also indicates that in May 2013, China fired a missile into nearly geo-synchronous earth orbit, “marking the highest known suborbital launch since the U.S. Gravity Probe A in 1976 and China’s highest known suborbital launch to date.” The commission report also notes that this was a test for an anti-satellite capability.<sup>6</sup>

In 2007, China successfully destroyed an aging orbiting satellite with an anti-satellite ballistic missile.<sup>7</sup> This capability is most dangerous to the United States, since the U.S. is the country with the greatest dependence on space. The most immediate result was that the collision created thousands of pieces of space debris in orbit, putting at risk U.S. and ally space satellites.

#### **Concerns Regarding Chinese Proliferation.**

China continues to participate in the weapons of mass destruction market. A 2010 U.S. government report concluded that “Chinese entities continue to supply a variety of missile related items to multiple customers including Iran, Syria and Pakistan.”<sup>8</sup> China’s well-documented cooperation on Pakistan’s nuclear program continues to be a serious problem and raises questions regarding whether the Chinese government knew about the A. Q. Khan network, which sold uranium enrichment technology to Iran, Syria, and Libya.<sup>9</sup>

In April 2012, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta confirmed that China had provided some assistance to North Korea’s ballistic missile program, which is a violation of multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions from 2006 and 2009.

**What Should Be Done.** U.S. failure to recognize and respond to Chinese strategic direction and capabilities is unacceptable. In order to prevent conflict in the future, the U.S. should:

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1. News release, “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces,” People’s Republic of China, Information Office of the State Council, April 16, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c\\_132312681.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm) (accessed November 15, 2013).
  2. Wendell Minnick, “New U.S. Law Seeks Answers on Chinese Nuke Tunnels,” *Defense News*, January 5, 2013, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20130105/DEFREG02/301050003/> (accessed November 15, 2013).
  3. U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2013 Annual Report to Congress*, November 20, 2013.
  4. U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2013*, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2013\\_china\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2013_china_report_final.pdf) (accessed November 15, 2013).
  5. National Air and Space Intelligence Center, *Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat*, 2013, <http://www.afisr.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-130710-054.pdf> (accessed December 11, 2013).
  6. U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2013 Annual Report to Congress*.
  7. Senator Jon Kyl, “Chinese Anti-Satellite Weapons and American Security,” Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 990, February 1, 2007, <http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/chinas-anti-satellite-weapons-and-american-national-security>.
  8. Deputy Director of National Intelligence, *Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions*, 2010.
  9. Shirley A. Kan, “China and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Missiles: Policy Issues,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, March 11, 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL31555.pdf> (accessed November 15, 2013).
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- **Modernize and maintain a robust nuclear weapons force, including warheads, nuclear weapons facilities, and delivery vehicles.**<sup>10</sup> President Obama has already decreased the number of U.S. nuclear weapons and is attempting further cuts. He has also failed to live up to his promise to the Senate to modernize the existing force. If foes and allies begin to doubt the U.S. nuclear credibility, the result could be increased proliferation or a buildup in countries like China. As General Robert Kehler has said, “It is not possible to accurately determine the precise level or conditions at which the PRC leadership might elect to attempt to match the U.S. nuclear inventory.”<sup>11</sup>
- **Invest in research and development programs.** The U.S. cannot leave its space assets undefended. Space is also the ultimate vantage point for intercepting ballistic missiles in their boost phase of flight, providing the U.S. with a national security advantage for combating Chinese sophisticated ballistic missiles.
- **Publicly denounce Chinese proliferation and aggressive rhetoric.** The U.S. should enforce the 2000 Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act and support the sovereignty of U.S. allies.<sup>12</sup>
- **Strengthen ballistic missile defense with U.S. allies.** China has voiced strong opposition to U.S. missile defense cooperation with Japan and South Korea, but this should not dissuade the U.S. from continuing to strengthen its relationships with those two important allies.

- **Refuse to pursue a comprehensive international “code of conduct” for space activities.**<sup>13</sup> A code of conduct would limit U.S. ability to test space weapons and employ space combat doctrines. The threat to U.S. security from Chinese missiles is real and growing. The U.S. should have complete freedom to use space to defend against this threat.<sup>14</sup>

**Prevent Conflict and Preserve Peace.** China is most immediately concerned with protecting its perceived right to massive and disputed swaths of territory,<sup>15</sup> but it understands that the U.S. could intervene in these regional disputes and is proactively preparing to deter and if need be confront the U.S. militarily.

Washington should not single-mindedly decrease its nuclear force, nor should it focus merely on threats from rogue nations; rather, it should remain unwavering in its commitment to its allies in Asia, in particular regarding missile defense cooperation. The U.S. should proactively deter and defend against real, growing, and sophisticated militaries.

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10. For more information, see Rebecca Heinrichs and Baker Spring, “Deterrence and Nuclear Targeting in the 21st Century,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2747, November 30, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/11/deterrence-and-nuclear-targeting-in-the-21st-century>.

11. Congressman Michael Turner, remarks at the International Security and Strategy Center, June 28, 2012.

12. Bill Gertz, “Under the Radar Launchers,” *Washington Free Beacon*, September 27, 2013, <http://freebeacon.com/under-the-radar-launchers/> (accessed November 15, 2013).

13. Baker Spring and Michaela Dodge, “More Limits on U.S. Space Systems Unacceptable,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3470, January 24, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/01/us-space-policy-more-limits-on-space-systems-unacceptable>.

14. Jeff Keuter and John B. Sheldon, “An Investment Strategy for National Security Space,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 129, February 20, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/02/an-investment-strategy-for-national-security-space>.

15. Dean Cheng, “How the U.S. Should Respond to the Chinese Naval Challenge,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4037, September 6, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/09/maritime-development-how-the-us-should-respond-to-the-chinese-naval-challenge>.