



Watching China's nuclear capabilities

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(MainsGS2&3:Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests & Role of external state and non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security)

Context:

A Recent report for 2021 released by the Pentagon named China Military Power Report (CMPR) categorically underscores the growing challenge posed by the increasing capabilities of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its ambitions across various dimensions of military power.

Undergoing a fundamental transformation:

- The PRC's nuclear capabilities are undergoing a fundamental transformation and a shift seems to be evident in both the quantity and the quality of the PRC's atomic arsenal.
- Even before the release of the CMPR, there was significant concern globally about the trajectory of China's strategic capabilities.
- Confirmation provided by the CMPR reveals four specific areas where change is underway — quantitative strength, atomic yield, delivery capabilities and posture.

Quantitative strength:

- The size of the PRC's nuclear arsenal is set to increase. The 2020 CMPR projected roughly a doubling of PRC nuclear warheads by 2030, but now the 2021 edition projects China close to quadrupling its current inventory within that time frame.

- Specifically, the Department of Defense (DoD) anticipates that China may have up to 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027, of which roughly 200 warheads will be on land-based ICBMs capable of threatening the United States; and at least 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030.

Low-yield weapons:

- The PRC is likely to privilege expansion in the direction of low-yield weapons. Low-yield weapons are weapons meant for battlefield use during conventional military operations and against conventional targets such as concentrations of armoured, artillery and infantry forces.
- A 2017 defense industry publication indicated a lower-yield weapon had been developed for use against campaign and tactical targets that would reduce collateral damage.
- Prior to the release of the CMPR, evidence that the PRC was testing low-yield devices has periodically surfaced in years past.

Delivery capabilities:

- The low-yield nuclear warheads are also likely to find their way into a key delivery capability — the PRC's Dong-Feng-26 (DF-26) ballistic missile.
- The DF-26 is the PRC's first nuclear-capable missile system that can conduct precision strikes, and therefore, is the most likely weapon system to field a lower-yield warhead in the near-term.
- It is an Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) which is launched from a Transporter Erector Launcher (TEL).
- This missile has already undergone deployment at Korla in the Xinjiang region in Western China.
- In addition to the DF-26, China has also developed the JL-2 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) with a range of 7,200 kilometres capable of striking targets across continental Asia.

Shift from commitment:

- China's move towards a Launch on Warning (LoW) nuclear posture marks an important shift in the PRC's commitment to ensuring that no adversary doubts its response in the event of a nuclear first strike.
- A higher alert posture not only risks reducing the threshold for nuclear use in the form of preemption but it could also sow the seeds of miscalculation and unintended nuclear use.

Caution for India:

- The PRC's nuclear competition with the United States will have a cascading effect and for India there are some serious implications with China's increasingly minatory nuclear military capabilities.
- The size of China's nuclear arsenal complicates the potency of India's nuclear arsenal and it is especially true in the face of the PRC's pursuit of missile defences in the form of the HQ-19 interceptors, which are specifically designed and developed to execute mid-course interception of medium-range ballistic missiles.
- A significantly larger Chinese nuclear arsenal paired to missile defences will limit damage to the PRC and more menacingly threatens the survivability of the Indian nuclear arsenal.

Resort to First Use:

- Despite Beijing's pursuit of No First Use (NFU), which is reversible, the PRC could also significantly degrade an Indian retaliatory strike if China chooses to resort to First Use (FU) of nuclear weapons, and even worse outrightly decapitate India's nuclear forces.
- Thus, Indian strategic planners will have to think about the quantitative nuclear balance and India's nuclear posture *vis-à-vis* the PRC.

Maritime threat:

- The maritime dimension of China's nuclear capabilities might not be an immediate strategic challenge but will potentially become one in the coming years for New Delhi.
- Despite the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the Chinese have added two new Type 094 (Jin class) SSBNs/nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines to their existing fleet.
- The Chinese Navy has carried out bathymetric and ocean mapping surveys in the Indian Ocean crucial to the execution of sub-surface military operations.
- Thus, India will have to specifically watch the pattern in the People Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) nuclear submarine deployments and address the deficit in its subsurface nuclear delivery capabilities.

Conclusion:

- Holding the line' is likely to require frequent and sustained proactive enforcement actions to disincentivize full-frontal PRC assaults on the rules-based order in Asia-Pacific.
- PRC probing behavior and provocations must be met with a range of symmetric and asymmetric responses that impose real costs.