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## Greater China

Dec 14, 2006

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### China's real nuclear capabilities

By David Isenberg

WASHINGTON - It is never hard to find someone worrying about China's nuclear weapons. For example, the recent annual report of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission says, "Beijing continues to improve its older intercontinental ballistic missiles and seeks to field increasingly mobile, accurate and survivable and therefore more credible ICBMs ... China's newer longer-range [missile] systems will reach many areas of the world ... including virtually the entire continental United

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States."

Yet it seems that China has more to worry about than the United States, according to another recent report. It found, just like classic "missile gap" alarm of the Cold War, that the US military, intelligence agencies and conservative think-tanks and news organizations are exaggerating China's nuclear-weapons capability to justify developing a new generation of nuclear and conventional weapons.

And in a surrealistic act of mirror-imaging, the Chinese have been citing US weapons upgrades as a rationale for modernizing theirs, locking the two nations in a dangerous action-and-reaction competition reminiscent of the Cold War, according to a report issued on November 30 by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

In a perverse way it actually makes sense. Ever since the crackup of the Soviet Union, various political and military figures have been desperately searching for rationales to justify hanging on to and modernizing the US nuclear arsenal.

Of course, the negligible size of China's nuclear forces has made that a hard sell. As the report notes right at the start, "The

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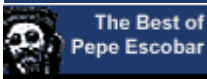
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Chinese-US nuclear relationship is dramatically disproportionate in favor of the United States and will remain so for the foreseeable future."

Even the Pentagon's last annual "Military Power of the People's Republic of China" report notes that Beijing has consistently stated its adherence to a "no first use" nuclear doctrine, which is that China will never use nuclear weapons first against a nuclear-weapons state, nor will China use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear-weapons state or nuclear-weapons-free zone.

It also noted that China currently deploys about 20 silo-based, liquid-fueled ICBMs, which constitute its primary means of holding continental US targets at risk. But according to the FAS-NRDC report, the United States has more than 830 missiles - most with multiple warheads - that can reach China. By 2015, when US intelligence projects that China will have 75 missiles primarily targeted against the United States, the US force will include 780 land- and sea-based missiles.

The report found that although the United States has maintained extensive nuclear-strike plans against Chinese targets for more than a half-century, China has never responded by building large nuclear forces of its own and is unlikely to do so in the future. As a result, Chinese nuclear weapons are quantitatively and qualitatively much inferior to their US counterparts.

China's total stockpile numbers about 200 warheads; the United States has nearly 10,000. By 2015, after China deploys a new generation of ballistic missiles and the US has completed its planned reductions, China may have some 220 warheads and the US more than 5,000.

The report's main finding is that the Pentagon and others routinely highlight specific incidents out of context that inaccurately portray a looming Chinese threat. Specifically, the report demonstrates that they have been embellishing China's submarine- and long-range-missile capabilities.

US intelligence agencies warn that the Chinese will be able to target 75-100 nuclear warheads at the continental United States by 2015. But that prediction assumes China will be able to deploy 40-55 new DF-31A missiles before 2015, in addition to two other shorter-range missiles. Given that the Chinese have yet to conduct test flights of the DF-31A, the report concluded that that assumption is highly questionable.

The Pentagon also has made much out of the fact that China's next-generation missiles will be mobile. But the majority of China's ballistic-missile force has always been mobile, the report points out, and the US military has targeted it as a routine matter since the 1980s. In fact, improved US targeting of Chinese missiles has played a significant role in prompting China to develop new long-range missiles.

As the report makes clear, the disparity between US and Chinese nuclear capabilities is so overwhelming as to make any talk about the Chinese threat farcical. For example:

- None of China's long-range nuclear forces are believed to be on alert; most US ballistic missiles are on high alert, ready to launch within minutes after receiving a launch order.
- China's sole nuclear-ballistic-missile submarine has never gone on patrol. As a result, the crews of the new Jin-class subs currently under construction will need to start almost from scratch to develop the operational and tactical skills and procedures that are essential if a sea-based deterrent is to be militarily effective and matter strategically.
- China may be able to build two or three new missile subs over the next decade, but they would be highly vulnerable to anti-

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submarine forces; the US Navy has 14 missile-bearing subs and has moved the majority of them into the Pacific.

- China may have a small number of aircraft with a secondary nuclear capability, but they would be severely tested by US and allied air-defense systems or in air-to-air combat. The United States operates 72 long-range bombers assigned missions with nuclear gravity bombs and land-attack cruise missiles.
- China does not have nuclear-armed cruise missiles, although US intelligence suspects it might develop such a capability in the future. The United States has more than 1,000 nuclear cruise missiles for delivery by aircraft and attack submarines.

Another relevant aspect of the report, especially in light of recent US experience with Iraq, details how badly US intelligence has misjudged Chinese nuclear capabilities. The report found that estimates about the size of the Chinese nuclear arsenal were grossly overstated, sometimes by several hundred percent, and timelines for when new systems would come on line were almost always much too optimistic.

The reasons for these misjudgments include China's ability to keep its capabilities hidden, a tendency among some intelligence analysts to overstate their conclusions, and the Pentagon's general inclination to assume the worst. This predisposition to exaggerate the Chinese threat unfortunately remains evident today.

The sad irony is that both countries point to what the other is doing as a justification to modernize. The report notes that China is about to deploy three new long-range ballistic missiles that the US says were developed in response to its own deployment of more accurate Trident sea-launched ballistic missiles in the early 1980s.

Meanwhile, the US has increased its capability to target Chinese mobile missiles, and the Pentagon is arguing that the long-term outlook for China's long-range ballistic-missile force requires increased targeting of Chinese forces.

*David Isenberg, a senior analyst with the Washington-based British American Security Information Council (BASIC), has a wide background in arms-control and national-security issues. The views expressed are his own.*

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