

China expands sub fleet

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China's military is engaged in a major buildup of submarines that includes five new strategic nuclear-missile boats and several advanced nuclear-powered attack submarines, according to the Office of Naval Intelligence.

The new nuclear-powered missile submarines (SSBNs), identified as Type 094s, will be outfitted with new 5,000-mile range JL-2 missiles that "will provide China with a modern and robust sea-based nuclear deterrent force," the ONI stated in report made up of written answers to questions on the Chinese submarine buildup.

The ONI report was first disclosed to Sea Power magazine, and a copy was obtained by The Washington Times. It was the first time the Pentagon has identified the number of new Chinese strategic submarines under construction.

The five new missile submarines will "provide more redundancy and capacity for a near-continuous at-sea SSBN presence," the ONI said, which noted that sea trials for some of the submarines are under way and the first deployments could begin as early as next year.

The buildup is raising new concerns among senior Pentagon planners already worried by Beijing's broader strategic nuclear-forces buildup, which also includes several new long-range land-based nuclear missiles and a land-attack cruise missile similar to the Tomahawk.

"This is a troubling development," Richard Fisher, a specialist on the Chinese military with the private International Assessment and Strategy Center, said of the submarine buildup.

The five missile submarines, each equipped with 12 JL-2 missiles, shows that China is working to achieve a force of 120 long-range nuclear missiles over the next decade, about half of them to be carried on the submarines, Mr. Fisher said. The other half would be the 60 land-based DF-31 missiles that current deployment rates will give China by then, he said.

The 120 missiles also could have multiple-warheads, since China is known to have acquired all the needed technology from the U.S. during the 1990s.

Retired Vice Adm. Michael McConnell, commenting at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Tuesday, said China's nuclear missiles pose a threat.

"It's a matter of they're building their military, in my view, to reach some state of parity with the United States," said Mr. McConnell, the new director of national intelligence. "So they're a threat today, they would become an increasing threat over time."

Little is known about China's nuclear forces and efforts by Pentagon officials to engage Chinese military leaders about their strategic weapons and forces has not been successful. China's government has insisted its current modernization is part of a peaceful development, but the contrasting strategic nuclear-forces buildup is worrying, defense officials said.

Chinese Gen. Zhu Chenghu told reporters in 2005 that China would attack U.S. cities with nuclear weapons in response to any conventionally armed U.S. missile strikes against China during a conflict over Taiwan. Years earlier, Gen. Xiong Guangkai threatened to use nuclear weapons against Los Angeles if the U.S. helped Taiwan defend against a Chinese

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invasion of the island.

The missile-submarine buildup would provide Beijing with a major upgrade on current capabilities. In 1983, China built one Xia-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, reportedly with 12 1,000-mile range JL-1 missiles. But that solitary submarine has only twice test-fired its missiles and never ventured beyond China's regional waters.

"Although the range of the JL-1 limits the Xia's utility as a deterrent platform, targets throughout the region, including U.S. military facilities, could be targeted with the JL-1 from launch points inside traditional Chinese navy operating areas," the ONI said.

On China's new attack submarine, the ONI stated that China already has launched and is performing sea trials on an unspecified number of Type 093 nuclear-powered attack submarines. Published reports in China have said two Type 093 attack submarines are deployed and use "foreign technologies" and advanced anti-ship missiles and torpedoes.

The new advances are part of China's efforts to bolster its anti-ship weapons to permit strikes at greater ranges from the Chinese coast than its current diesel-powered submarine force offers, the ONI said. China currently is upgrading its current force of about 55 attack submarines -- most of them easy-to-track diesel boats -- with more-advanced and harder-to-track vessels, including Russian-made Kilos, and its own Song- and Yuan-class submarines.

"Each of these submarine classes, which are quiet platforms with anti-ship cruise missiles, is an integral part of China's regional anti-access strategy," ONI said. "The quieting incorporated into these submarines is required for successful operations in the open ocean operating areas which could facilitate the [Chinese navy's] wartime mission of keeping enemy combatants outside of strike range of the theater of operation."

A Song-class submarine surfaced undetected within five miles, well within firing range, of the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk in October.

The ONI stated that China's maritime strategy is focused on blocking U.S. or Japanese intervention in a future conflict over Taiwan. To that end, Beijing has begun equipping its medium- and short-range ballistic missiles based on shore, hundreds of which are deployed across the Taiwan Strait from the island that the communist regime views as a renegade province, with maneuvering warheads.

These radar-guided or heat-seeking weapons "provide the accuracy necessary to attack a ship at sea," ONI said.

But China's rise in international trade and commerce, plus its growing dependence on imported foreign oil, also has expanded Beijing's maritime strategy from a mostly submarine force to one of building surface ships to "defend sea lines of communication" (SLOCs), because protecting sea-lanes with submarines is difficult.

ONI also said that in addition to new destroyers, "by 2020, China is likely to operate an aircraft carrier, the initial unit of which may be the refurbished ex-Varyag, acquired from Ukraine in 2000, to further support SLOC protection."

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