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China and the Age of Nuclear Coercion

by Gordon G. Chang | July 2024

“I don’t think I’ve seen anything more disturbing in my career than the Chinese ongoing expansion of their nuclear force,” [said](#) Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall in House testimony in March of last year.¹

What is Chinese ruler Xi Jinping up to? He is putting in place the arsenal to threaten the destruction of any country opposing his plans of territorial aggression. Yes, China’s most destructive weapons are now meant less for deterrence and more for coercion.

And in an age of nuclear blackmail, something is bound to go horribly wrong.

China has never publicly confirmed the number of its nuclear weapons. The Pentagon in a November 2022 report forecast that China would [quadruple](#) nukes from about 400 then to 1,500 by 2035.²

These estimates look far too low. James Howe, the noted nuclear analyst, [predicts](#) China will have between 3,390 to 3,740 weapons by 2035.³ Richard Fisher of the International Assessment and Strategy Center looks at the rapid increase in delivery platforms, such as missiles and subs, and thinks the regime will have even more nukes. His 2035 estimate: 7,000. “That figure would be consistent with their requirements of obtaining global hegemony and complete domination of the United States and all other democracies,” he told me last month.

Whatever the number, everyone agrees that the Chinese regime is rapidly building its arsenal. As Admiral Charles Richard, then commander of U.S. Strategic Command, [said](#) in 2021, “We are witnessing a strategic breakout by China.”⁴

That breakout became especially evident in 2021 when observers saw that China, in three separate fields in the northern part of the country, was building perhaps as many as 360 missile silos.⁵

The silos appear designed to take the DF-41 missile, which has a maximum range of 9,300 miles—putting all America in reach from those three fields—and can carry 10 warheads apiece. Of course, China’s military could decide to not fill all the silos or even any of them—the Chinese, after all, are the masters of deception—but the strategic direction is clear.

“For decades, they were quite comfortable with an arsenal of a few hundred nuclear weapons, which was fairly clearly a second-strike capability to act as a deterrent,” Kendall testified, referring to China. “That expansion that they’re undertaking puts us into a new world that we’ve never lived in before, where you have three powers—three great powers, essentially—with large arsenals of nuclear weapons.”

The Chinese regime is no longer content with a “minimal deterrent,” in other words, an arsenal only big enough to prevent an attack. With its rapid build-up, it is apparently looking for a “war-fighting” capability. With such a capability, its threats to launch first strikes would be credible and Beijing would be able to intimidate adversaries. The ability to completely annihilate the United States, for instance, could convince Washington to not defend Taiwan.

In fact, China, which has pledged to never use nuclear weapons first, has throughout this century made threats to do just that. For instance, in July

and September of 2021, China threatened to nuke Japan for supporting Taiwan⁶ and Australia for joining AUKUS,⁷ the submarine-building coalition of Australia, the U.K., and the U.S. In March 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Defense promised the “worst consequences” for countries helping Taiwan defend itself.⁸

Moreover, China has made out-of-the-blue threats to incinerate America. In October 2013, with no apparent provocation, the main outlets of Chinese Party and state media—*People’s Daily*, China Central Television, and *PLA Daily*, among others—ran identical articles about how Chinese submarines launching ballistic missiles tipped with nuclear warheads could kill tens of millions of Americans.⁹ They even listed the 11 cities targeted: Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Portland in Maine, and the Navy towns of Annapolis and Norfolk. Chicago was not safe either: The Chinese reports also talked about wind-borne radiation deaths in the Windy City.

Why do we speak of a decade-old warning? These articles were not the work of rogue journalists. They were splashed across Chinese media at the same time, a clear indication they were directed from the top of the Chinese political system, just after Xi Jinping took power as the country’s ruler in November 2012. They were mere words, but words about the world’s most destructive weapons have consequences.

Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping’s partner, knows how to use words of this type. His Russia has a nuclear doctrine known as “escalate to deescalate,” which entails threatening or using nuclear weapons in



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a conventional conflict. John Hyten, who retired as the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2021, more correctly [termed the doctrine “escalate to win, escalate to end.”](#)¹⁰ As National Institute for Deterrence Studies senior fellow Peter Huessy told me, escalating to win assumes nuclear threats will “coerce an enemy to stand down and not fight.”

Putin in fact put theory into practice. In early February 2022, his nuclear forces [engaged in an exercise that normally took place in the fall](#),¹¹ a move widely interpreted at the time as a warning. Then, on February 24, the day of the Ukraine invasion, the Russian president [spoke of “consequences that you have never experienced in your history.”](#)¹²

On February 27, Putin put nuclear [forces on “special combat readiness,”](#)¹³ high alert. On March 1, Russia [sortied](#)¹⁴ ballistic missile submarines and land-based mobile missile launchers in what was called a drill.

“Yes, Putin might do the unthinkable,” said James Clapper, the former director of national intelligence, to Business Insider, at the time.

Putin has not let up. Last June, after making numerous promises to incinerate Ukraine and the rest of the world, Putin [announced he would deploy tactical nukes to Belarus.](#)¹⁵ President Joe Biden [responded](#) that month by saying that Putin’s warnings about using tactical nuclear weapons were “real.”¹⁶

Real or not, the threats were effective. Putin saw how America reacted to China’s nuke threats, so he responded by making similar threats of his own in connection with Ukraine.

China in turn watched the United States and others, because of those Russian threats, not support Kyiv to the extent they should have. Both Moscow and Beijing, therefore, have used their nukes, without lighting them off. And to make matters worse, after the Ukraine invasion North Korea stepped up its threats. The North in late 2022 even [enacted a law authorizing preemptive nuclear strikes.](#)¹⁷

“For most of the nuclear age, it was assumed nuclear weapons were instruments of deterrence,” Huessy, also president of GeoStrategic Analysis, told me in June. “There has, however, been a sea change in contemplated nuclear weapons use. Now, these weapons in the hands of China, Russia, and North Korea are instruments of coercion and blackmail, what General Hyten characterized as the ‘escalate to win’ strategy.”

China in particular has made blatant preparations to wage nuclear war on America, including flying a maneuverable balloon over North America in January and February of last year. Its path over the lower 48 states was not random, especially its figure eights over sensitive locations.

China’s balloon surveilled, among other sites, Malmstrom, F. E. Warren, and Minot Air Force Bases, which house all of America’s Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles. The balloon also passed close to Whiteman Air Force Base, home to all of America’s nuclear-capable B-2 bombers, and Omaha’s Offutt Air Force Base, the headquarters of U.S. Strategic Command, which has operational control of all America’s nuclear weapons.



So, it appears, China wants more nuclear weapons because it is contemplating brandishing them to intimidate America.

China is obviously preparing a nuclear strike on America, especially because there is some suggestion that its balloon flight gathered information useful for disrupting command and control of America's nuke weapons. So, it appears, China wants more nuclear weapons because it is contemplating brandishing them to intimidate America.

Why wouldn't China adopt Putin's playbook now? Biden, as mentioned, showed fear in the face of Putin's nuclear threats in early 2022, both before and after the Ukraine invasion. The American president has tried to "manage" that war, fearful of what the Russian leader might do if he were on the verge of losing it. Yet it's not possible to "manage" an aggressor by showing fear. A leader intimidated by threats to use nuclear weapons starts an especially treacherous chain of events. Either that leader will have to confront the aggressor at a later and more perilous time or surrender everything. There's no appeasing a militant brandishing a nuke.

War between China and the U.S., as Henry Kissinger [said](#) in June of last year to Bloomberg, is "probable."¹⁸ Whether or not he was correct, this is the most dangerous moment in history. Many say the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 or the Checkpoint Charlie confrontation in Berlin of the preceding year were more dangerous.

These crises certainly, at the time, looked that way, but they were in fact not. We know from both Soviet and American archives that neither Nikita Khrushchev nor John F. Kennedy was willing to use nuclear weapons. We do not know that today about Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, or Kim Jong Un.

China, Russia, and North Korea are "expanding and diversifying their nuclear arsenals at a breakneck pace, showing little or no interest in arms control," [said](#) Pranay Vaddi, a National Security Council official, last month at an arms-control conference.¹⁹ These three regimes and Iran, he said, are "increasingly cooperating and coordinating with each other—in ways that run counter to peace and stability, threaten the United States, our allies and our partners, and exacerbate regional tension."

Herman Kahn, the great Hudson Institute nuclear strategist, told us we have to think about the "unthinkable." Now, we need to start preparing for it too.

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Endnotes

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