

China Prepares to Send Nuclear Submarines into Pacific Ocean

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An article last week in the British-based Guardian reported that the Chinese military “is poised to send submarines armed with nuclear missiles into the Pacific Ocean for the first time, arguing that new US weapons systems have so undermined Beijing’s existing deterrent force that it has been left with no alternative.”

While the timing is uncertain, the move ups the ante in an intensifying nuclear arms race between the US and China that heightens the risk of war. Since coming to office, the Obama administration has engaged in a military build-up and strengthening of alliances throughout Asia in preparation for war with China. It has committed more than \$1 trillion over 30 years to the upgrading and expansion of the US nuclear arsenal and delivery systems.

The Chinese regime has responded by taking measures to maintain its ability to launch a reprisal in the event of a US nuclear attack on its military apparatus, cities and leadership. The decision to send nuclear-armed nuclear submarines (SSBNs) on patrol in the Pacific Ocean is the latest step in Beijing’s efforts to protect its relatively small nuclear force—estimated at 260 warheads, as compared to 7,000 for the US.

According to the *Guardian*, Chinese military officials insist that such patrols are “inevitable” following the announcement by the US and South Korea in March to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system to the Korean Peninsula. While Washington’s pretext is the supposed threat posed by North Korea, the THAAD deployment is part of the US anti-missile system build-up in North East Asia aimed against China.

There is nothing defensive about the Pentagon’s anti-ballistic missile installations, which are an integral component of its strategy for fighting a nuclear war against China. Unlike Beijing, Washington has never renounced a nuclear first strike—that is, being the first side in a war to unleash nuclear weapons. The Pentagon’s plan is to seek to obliterate the entire Chinese nuclear arsenal in a first strike, rendering China incapable of retaliating. The relatively small number of THAAD interceptors could not counter a Chinese first strike and only have significance as the means of destroying stray Chinese missiles that escaped the initial American onslaught.

In other words, the US is no longer seeking to maintain a balance of terror—the strategy known during the Cold War as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)—but is aiming to achieve nuclear primacy, which means the use of nuclear weapons to render a rival completely defenceless against further attacks.

An article in the prestigious US-based *Foreign Affairs* magazine a decade ago entitled “The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy” provoked furious denials by the Pentagon and the White House. Nevertheless, behind a phony campaign of championing nuclear disarmament, the US has been striving to achieve nuclear primacy over any potential rival—especially Russia and China.

The article focussed primarily on Russia, which has a far more extensive and sophisticated nuclear force. Nevertheless, its analysis of Chinese nuclear capabilities goes a long way to explaining China’s moves to ensure that its nuclear weapons would not be completely wiped out in a US attack. It stated:

“China’s nuclear arsenal is even more vulnerable to a US attack [than Russia’s]. A US first strike could succeed whether it was launched as a surprise or in the midst of a crisis during a Chinese alert. China has a limited strategic nuclear arsenal. The People’s Liberation Army currently possesses no modern SSBNs or long-range bombers. Its naval arm used to have two ballistic missile submarines, but one sank, and the other, which had such poor capabilities that it never left Chinese waters, is no longer operational.

“China’s medium-range bomber force is similarly unimpressive: the bombers are obsolete and vulnerable to attack. According to unclassified US government assessments, China’s entire intercontinental nuclear arsenal consists of 18 stationary single-warhead ICBMs. These are not ready to launch on warning: their warheads are kept in storage and the missiles themselves are unfueled. (China’s ICBMs use liquid fuel, which corrodes the missiles after 24 hours. Fuelling them is estimated to take two hours.) The lack of an advanced early warning system adds to the vulnerability of the ICBMs. It appears that China would have no warning at all of a US submarine-launched missile attack or a strike using hundreds of stealthy nuclear-armed cruise missiles.”

Over the past decade, the Chinese military has taken strenuous steps to remedy these major deficiencies. It has built solid-fuel missiles, constructed four Jin-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines, reportedly developed a mobile rail-mounted missile, improved its early warning systems and taken other counter measures. However, China’s arsenal remains small and vulnerable and many of the technologies are generations behind those of the United States.

Wu Riqiang, a Chinese academic from Renmin University in Beijing, told the *Guardian* that China’s Jin or Type 094 nuclear submarines were too noisy and easily located by US attack subs, and would never get to the mid-Pacific to enable them to hit continental America. “My argument is that because of the high noise level of the Type 094 and China’s lack of experience of running a SSBN fleet, China cannot and should not put 094 in deterrent patrol in the near future,” he said.

The concern in the Pentagon about China’s nuclear submarines is one of the real reasons behind its “freedom of navigation” provocations in the South China Sea. The US is determined to maintain its free access to these waters, which are directly adjacent to Hainan Island, where the Chinese submarine fleet is based. The Pentagon is determined to be able to track the movements of China’s nuclear submarines and thus have the ability to destroy them before they reach the open waters of the Pacific.

US nuclear supremacy poses difficult dilemmas for the Chinese leadership, which up until

now has been reluctant to relinquish tight control over its nuclear arsenal, and has therefore stored warheads and missiles separately. By arming nuclear submarines, warheads and missiles would be stored on board, posing the question: would the commander be authorised to launch in the event of a US “decapitation” strike on the Chinese leadership in Beijing?

While the Chinese nuclear posture is largely defensive, the scramble to build a nuclear arsenal is nevertheless reactionary and dangerous. The Chinese leadership defends the interests of a tiny super-rich oligarchy and is organically incapable of making any appeal to workers in the United States or internationally. Its whipping up of Chinese nationalism and militarism further divides the international working class, the only social force capable of halting the slide toward a nuclear holocaust.

The nuclear arms race is compounding the increasingly volatile and unpredictable situation in Asia. As American academic Jeffrey Lewis, from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, told the *Guardian*: “The law of unintended consequences is in danger of taking the upper hand. The two sides may thus be stumbling blindly into severe crisis, instability and growing competition by China with respect to strategic forces. A competition between unevenly matched forces is inherently unstable.”

In its own cautious way, Lewis’s comment is another warning of the rising risks of a nuclear war.

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