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China's Strategic Ambitions: A Strategy to Address China's Nuclear Breakout

Jennifer Bradley

Jennifer Bradley is a Senior Deterrence Analyst in the Plans and Policy Directorate at United States Strategic Command. She is also a doctoral student in Missouri State University's Defense and Strategic Studies program. The views presented in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of U.S. Strategic Command, the U.S. Air Force, Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

That China is modernizing its nuclear forces is not shocking as it has been conducting modernization on both its nuclear and conventional forces since Deng Xiaoping assumed power in the 1980s and began his extensive transformation of the Chinese system. What has taken world leaders by surprise is the revelation of the extent of China's nuclear modernization and expansion program in the last several years. General John Hyten, former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described China's nuclear modernization as "unprecedented,"[1] while Admiral Charles Richard, Commander of United States Strategic Command, stated "China's explosive growth and modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking."[2]

Historically, China has adhered to a minimum deterrent strategy made credible by a small nuclear force. This deterrent strategy focused on a small number of nuclear weapons capable of executing a secure second-strike capability and touted both a sole purpose and no first use doctrine.[3] The growth of China's nuclear capabilities, coupled with China's strategic ambitions calls into question whether China will maintain its minimum deterrence posture or transform to a more coercive nuclear strategy to meet both its security objectives and accomplish its

national ambitions. The dramatic increase in the size and capability of its force, coupled with a potential change in strategy, poses a strategic risk to the United States and its allies in the region. This requires a U.S. strategy to address the growth of China's nuclear arsenal and hedge against the uncertainty created by the potential ways China may use its force to achieve its strategic ambitions.

China's Changing Security Environment

In 2012, Xi Jinping walked out onto the stage at the closing of the 18th Party Congress as the new Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. Soon after, he assumed the position of Chairman of the Central Military Commission and President of the Chinese government. He immediately set about consolidating power. His success in eliminating rivals and taking over leadership of key areas in the Chinese government has made him the most influential leader of China since Mao Zedong.[4] His personal ambition to become China's preeminent leader was just the first step in making China the Asia Pacific's preeminent power.

After taking power, Xi articulated his vision for China in a series of speeches outlining his Chinese Dream. Described as the Two Centenary Goals, the first seeks to become a "moderately prosperous society in all respects" by the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021.[5] The second goal seeks to become a "fully developed, rich, and powerful" country to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2049.[6] In addition to setting milestones for China's development, the Chinese Dream objectives include leading "the reform of the global governance system," altering aspects of the status quo viewed "as incompatible with the sovereignty, security, and development interests" of China and "full reunification" with Taiwan on Beijing's terms--goals which put China directly at odds with not only its regional neighbors, but with the United States and its allies. [7]

Under Xi's leadership, China has become more aggressive in trying to achieve its aspirations. This has provoked responses from not only regional nations concerned about their sovereignty and access to disputed resources, but global nations concerned with the international governance system. Further, the United States has abandoned engagement as its primary strategy for China and adopted a more confrontational approach, causing China's deputy Foreign Minister to comment that "a whole-of-government and whole-of-society campaign is being waged [by the United States] to bring China down."[8]

Beyond international resistance to China's ambitions, China's security environment is being complicated by internal issues as well. China's environmental degradation has resulted in an acute strain on its already limited water resources, which is undermining its food and energy security, as well as its internal stability.[9] Further, the legacy of the One Child Policy means that China's workforce is decreasing, with growing responsibility for an aging population which is

steadily increasing. This, plus unrealized economic reforms, will challenge China's ability to continue its economic "miracle" unabated.[10] This may put pressure on China to achieve and consolidate its goals sooner rather than later.

At the turn of the century, Chinese leaders perceived a favorable security environment which would provide a "strategic window of opportunity" to complete the revitalization of the nation.[11] The international resistance to China's ambitions to reshape the global order and establish its sphere of influence coupled with the internal challenges that it faces means that China's strategic window of opportunity may be closing. This more challenging and potentially dangerous security environment is the backdrop to China's modernization and expansion of its nuclear force. Further, as China's force expands in size and capability, it may choose to adapt its nuclear policy and doctrine to better address the security challenges it faces.

China's Deterrent Strategy

Nuclear weapons hold a valuable position in both how China conceptualizes its security environment, and how it envisions its rightful place in the world order. Not only are nuclear weapons described as "a firm 'shield' for safeguarding national security," the *Science of Military Strategy* also identified them as a key aspect of China's international status, stating, "Nuclear weapons have always played the role of a pillar for China's great-power status, and hereafter will remain important marks and symbols clearly displaying China's international position."[12] For China, nuclear weapons guarantee not only its international position, but safeguard it from nuclear coercion and attack from the other nuclear great powers.

Traditionally, China has maintained a minimum deterrence posture characterized by a lean and effective force which was sufficient to deter nuclear attacks and nuclear blackmail by maintaining a secure second-strike capability.[13] This deterrence posture was predicated on ambiguity to create uncertainty in the adversary as to China's nuclear strength.[14] Further, China has a declared No First Use policy stating it will never use nuclear weapons first and also declared that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack.[15] China's deterrent policy also offers a negative security assurance to non-nuclear states, stating "China will unconditionally not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or in nuclear-weapon-free zones, and will never enter into a nuclear arms race with any other country."[16] Finally, due to the limited capability of its nuclear force, China has adopted a countervalue strategy, holding at risk adversary urban areas.[17]

China's Growing Nuclear Force

The modernization of both the quality and quantity of China's nuclear force has been occurring for decades. In 1999, China debuted the DF-31 road mobile Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) during a parade celebrating the 50th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. This

was the first road mobile missile that China developed, and deployed several years later, capable of targeting the United States.[18] China continued to add new capabilities to its nuclear arsenal during the first decade of the 21st century making consistent progress in developing a nuclear force capable of delivering a secure second-strike capability. In 2005, when China was still significantly disadvantaged in the nuclear balance, Lyle J. Goldstein, while a professor at the U.S. Navy War College, predicted that Chinese nuclear development "may emerge as one of the most important quandaries confronting twenty-first-century strategists."[19]

Since Dr. Goldstein made that prediction, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), charged with the land-based nuclear mission, was elevated to full service status in 2015. Giving the PLARF equal status as the Army, Navy and Air Force reveals the importance with which China views its strategic capabilities. In fact, Chinese President Xi has described the PLARF as "China's core force for strategic deterrence, a strategic buttress for China's position as a major power, and an important cornerstone for defending national security."[20] The elevation of the force has emphasized joint exercises and joint training with the other services, improving the PLA's ability to coordinate respective force campaigns and strategic operations.[21]

With the increase in importance of its strategic forces, China has also accelerated and diversified its nuclear weapons development and modernization. China maintains its legacy silo-based DF-5 ICBMs, though they have upgraded the system to carry Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs).[22] After fielding the DF-31 road mobile ICBM in 2006, the PRC developed the DF-31A, an improved version with a range of up to 11,200 km, significantly greater than the DF-31's range of 7,000 km.[23] China currently has the DF-41 in production. It was flight tested in 2016 and became operational in 2020 with at least two brigades fielded.[24] It is suspected that the solid fueled missile will be both road-mobile and silo-based, replacing the liquid fueled DF-5, and will be capable of carrying 10 warheads with a range of 12,000-15,000 km.[25]

In addition to developments in its ICBM force, the PLARF has been developing medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBM, IRBM) that have both conventional and nuclear variants. The road-mobile solid-fueled DF-21 MRBM has been in service since the 1990s, though a more modern nuclear variant was deployed in 2016.[26] The DF-26 road-mobile IRBM is China's first precision strike capability with both conventional and lower-yield nuclear variants capable of striking Guam.[27] Further, the design of the DF-26 allows operators to quickly swap between conventional and nuclear payloads in the field.[28] Finally, China is developing the DF-17 equipped with a hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV). The PLARF began fielding this missile in 2020[29] and it is thought to be capable of carrying a nuclear payload and designed with the ability to defeat regional missile defenses.[30]

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operates the sea-leg of China's nuclear deterrent. It has a total of six Jin-class (Type 094) nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs)

though only four are thought to be currently operational.[31] Each SSBN is believed to be equipped with up to 12 JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM). The JL-2 carries a single warhead with a limited range of 7,200-9,000 km, meaning that it is unable to target the United States from Chinese littoral waters. To successfully hold the United States at risk, the Jin needs to enter the open Pacific. However, according to the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence the Jin is noisy, making it easily detectable and potentially vulnerable in the open Pacific.[32] China is developing the next generation of SSBNs, building the Type 096 which will carry the JL-3 SLBM capable of targeting the United States from Chinese littoral waters.[33] The improvements to these capabilities will make the sea-leg of China's nuclear deterrent more capable and survivable.

The Chinese strategic bomber force was inactive for decades until the PLA Air Force was assigned a "strategic deterrence" mission in 2012. Since then, China has updated the H-6N bomber, which is air-refuellable and cable of carrying an air-launched ballistic missile.[34] While the H-6N only has a range of around 3,100 km,[35] the addition of this capability gives the Chinese a regional nuclear triad. In addition to updating its legacy bombers, the Chinese are designing a new strategic bomber designated the H-20. While the specifications of the H-20 are still unknown to analysts, its speculated that the H-20 will be a stealth bomber capable of deep penetration with an operational range that will enable it to target Hawaii and Alaska when operating from the Chinese mainland.[36]

Finally, China is dramatically increasing the size of its force. Recently, three new missile fields were discovered where China appears to be constructing as many as 250 new long-range missile silos. This is an approximately ten-fold increase from the two dozen missile silos China had previously.[37] Further, if the Chinese were to decide to load each silo with MIRVed missiles, such as its newly fielded DF-41 capable of carrying 10 warheads, China would approach parity with U.S. and Russian treaty limited deployment numbers.[38] Even prior to this discovery, Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lt. Gen. Robert P. Ashley Jr. stated, "over the next decade, China is likely to at least double the size of its nuclear stockpile in the course of implementing the most rapid expansion and diversification of its nuclear arsenal in China's history."[39] Lt. Gen. Ashley's successor, Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2021, stating, "China probably seeks to narrow, match, or in some places exceed U.S. qualitative equivalency with new nuclear warheads and their delivery platforms."[40] In 2020, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated in its annual report to Congress that the PRC would double its force to 400 weapons by 2030.[41] The following year that estimation had increased to 1,000 weapons by 2030 underscoring the rapid pace of China's nuclear expansion.[42]

The rapid expansion of China's nuclear force calls into question its minimum deterrent strategy. Since China tested its first nuclear weapon, its deterrent strategy has been based on a lean and effective force capable of a secure second strike against countervalue targets. The

increase in the size and flexibility of the force suggests an expansion of China's nuclear strategy to include the ability to target counterforce targets in the region. This also calls into question China's dedication to its No First Use and Sole Purpose policies. The conditional nature of China's No First Use policy[43] and development of counterforce capabilities suggests China is expanding its nuclear policy to include deterring conventional conflict in the region, while also enabling a war fighting policy. Further, recent coercive nuclear threats against Japan also undermine China's negative security assurances to non-nuclear states.[44] Bottom line, China's expansion of both the quantity and sophistication of its nuclear force opens a myriad of options for China to adapt its deterrent strategy in the future.

Implications for the United States and Allies

China's robust nuclear modernization, when viewed in the context of its strategic ambitions, poses a serious challenge for the United States and its allies. Xi Jinping has made clear that unification with Taiwan is a necessity, most recently during a speech in October 2021, stating, "The historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled, and will definitely be fulfilled."[45] Further, Chinese leaders have made clear that this is an issue on which they are unwilling to compromise. According to a spokesman from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "When it comes to issues related to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity and other core interests, there is no room for China to compromise or make concessions. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory. The Taiwan issue is purely an internal affair of China that allows no foreign intervention."[46]

China's nuclear expansion cannot be viewed in isolation from the modernization of its conventional force. China's expansion of its conventional forces has steadily changed the balance of power in the region, giving it an advantage within the first island chain.[47] Further, China has developed a suite of capabilities to "dissuade, deter, or, if ordered, defeat third-party intervention" during a regional contingency.[48] However, despite these conventional advancements, the United States still possesses the superior nuclear force with a declaratory policy which eschews no first use. In China's view, U.S. policy leaves it vulnerable to nuclear coercion by the United States. With the advancements in its nuclear capability, China increases the survivability of its nuclear force and decreases its vulnerability to U.S. nuclear coercion, while improving its ability to deter the United States.[49]

The belief by China's leaders that unification with Taiwan is an issue that they cannot compromise on and that failure to do so poses an existential threat to the Chinese Communist Party, makes China's leadership increasingly risk acceptant.[50] This increased risk acceptance, coupled with confidence in the PLA strategist's ability to control the escalation of conventional conflict,[51] means that China may be willing to challenge the United States militarily to achieve its objectives. With its more capable nuclear force, the PRC may believe it can deter the United States from higher levels of escalation, or even intervening, allowing it to achieve its objectives.

According to Chinese writings, "The most important type of future regional wars will be conventional conflicts under conditions of nuclear deterrence, deterrence and actual war-fighting will exist at the same time, and their function and effectiveness will be mutually complementary."[52]

But China's ambitions do not stop at Taiwan. China seeks to reduce the influence of the United States in the Pacific while establishing its own sphere of influence. This reduction of U.S. influence and presence in the region would also challenge the ability of the United States to meet its security obligations to Japan, potentially enabling China to settle the East China Sea territorial dispute in its favor. Further, if China is successful in establishing its sphere of influence, it leaves U.S. regional allies, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines vulnerable to Chinese coercive tactics. Finally, it is unclear if China's ambitions stop at a regional sphere of influence. It is clear that China does seek to remake the international order to accommodate its desires, but does this also mean it seeks global influence as a superpower?[53] A robust nuclear capability provides China numerous options to achieve both its regional and global ambitions.

Potential Strategy to Address Change in China's Nuclear Force

The United States is an Indo-Pacific power. It has significant security, diplomatic and commercial interests in the region and its support of a rules-based international order has allowed regional nations, including China, to thrive and prosper, becoming an engine of global economic growth.[54] Though China has prospered in the rules-based international order, it seeks to reshape it to benefit itself at the expense of other nations. Further, China seeks to be the dominant power in Asia, reducing the influence of the United States and settling its regional territorial disputes, including unification with Taiwan, in its favor. China's ambitions increase the possibility for crisis, and potentially conflict, with the United States and its allies.

China is integrating its nuclear capabilities with its conventional forces, creating a holistic strategy where nuclear weapons serve as "a backstop to support conventional operations."[55] China has developed conventional capabilities that can achieve its regional objectives quickly, while the nuclear force it is building will raise the risks and the costs should the United States attempt to overturn Chinese gains.[56] Further, as China's nuclear force becomes more robust, its leaders may become more risk acceptant to instigate conventional operations, assessing that the United States would be unwilling to risk a conflict that could escalate to the nuclear level. The challenge for the United States is not just deterring Chinese nuclear use, but denying China the ability to use its robust nuclear capability to enable conventional operations at a lower level of escalation to achieve its regional ambitions.

To be successful, a U.S. strategy must have four objectives: first, recapitalize and increase the flexibility of the nuclear force; second, increase the size and capability of forces forward

deployed to the Pacific; third, diversify and increase the resiliency of allies and partners, globally, with a stake in the rules-based international order; and fourth, actively identify Chinese malign activities and promote U.S. and allied commitment to the region through a robust strategic communications campaign.

1. ***Recapitalize and increase the flexibility of the U.S. nuclear force***. In a statement to the Senate Committee on Armed Forces, Admiral Charles Richard, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, observed, "Strategic deterrence is the foundation of our national defense policy and enables every U.S. military operation around the world… If strategic deterrence fails, little else…no plan or capability, works as designed…. Every Operation Plan (OPLAN) in the Department and every capability assumes that strategic deterrence will hold."[57] Nuclear weapons provide the bedrock of the U.S. strategic deterrent, and as such, it is imperative that the United States remains committed to the recapitalization of the nuclear force.

Begun during the Obama administration, the modernization program seeks to replace each leg of the nuclear triad. This is a costly endeavor, made more critical as legacy Cold War systems reach the end of their life extension programs. Currently, the United States has a new LGM-35A Sentinel Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD),[58] B-21 Strategic Bomber and Columbia-class SSBN under development.[59] While the platforms are new, the warheads are based on existing designs and life extension programs, to avoid the need to conduct any underground testing.[60] Any delay in the replacement of legacy systems could result in a disruption of the ability of the United States to field a complete triad, leaving the United States and the allies that depend on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, vulnerable. It is critical that the recapitalization of the nuclear enterprise remains funded and on schedule.

In addition to modernizing and replacing legacy systems, the United States needs to increase the flexibility of its nuclear force. Specifically, the United States needs to invest in a low-yield nuclear option. As outlined previously, China is developing regional lower yield nuclear weapons capable of counterforce targeting with precision strike. Absent a low-yield capability, the United States lacks the ability to respond proportionately to such a threat, reducing the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. Despite arguments that low-yield nuclear weapons are more "useable," in actuality, they will increase the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent by enhancing the ability to respond at all levels of violence, increasing first strike stability.[61] Currently, the U.S. has fielded the W76-2 low-yield warhead on some SSBNs,[62] but the United States should develop and field low-yield precision strike capability for the bomber force and potentially for duel capable fighter aircraft.

Prior to the Trump Administration first outlining the need for a low-yield nuclear weapons in the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, the United States possessed the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile-Nuclear (TLAM-N), a low-yield nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM). Though it had been in service since the 1980s, it was eliminated by the Obama administration

based on its assessment of the security environment. However, in its assessment of the strategic environment the Trump Administration concluded that "the assumptions that underlay the Obama Administration's decision to abandon nuclear-armed SLCM capabilities have, unfortunately, proven incorrect,"[63] and outlined the need for a low-yield nuclear weapons option in the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR).[64] Though the security environment continues to deteriorate, the Biden Administration canceled the SLCM-N program first outlined in the 2018 NPR. This cancelation creates, in the words of Admiral Richard, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, "a deterrence and assurance gap."[65]

Finally, because of the uncertainty surrounding the future security environment and China's intentions for its future nuclear force and strategy (as well as Russia's nuclear arsenal), the U.S. nuclear infrastructure must be robust to provide a hedge. The nuclear stockpile should be modernized to preserve upload capacity in case the United States needs to increase the size of its nuclear force beyond New Start Treaty limitations. Further, the nuclear enterprise must maintain the skills to design and create new capabilities in order to sustain a technological advantage.[66] The future security environment cannot be predicted and the United States needs to be able to respond to any contingency.

2. Increase the size and capability of forces forward deployed to the Pacific. While the U.S. military still has a qualitative advantage over the PLA, bringing those capabilities to bear requires a long conflict to allow sufficient time for the United States to flow forces into the region.[67] This is the very type of conflict the PLA is designing and integrating its conventional and nuclear forces to avoid. In order to increase U.S. responsiveness to Chinese aggression, the United States should increase its force presence in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond building a trip-wire force in the Pacific, the United States should build a force capable of deterring China from attempting to achieve its strategic ambitions by force.

Unfortunately, the locations for forward basing of U.S. capabilities are limited and vulnerable to both conventional and nuclear Chinese ballistic missile strikes. To mitigate this risk, the United States should increase the size of its naval presence in the region. Currently, the PLA Navy is the largest in the world, designed to project power regionally, while China continues to modernize and expand the force into a formidable blue-water navy.[68] Further, the PLARF has deployed conventional anti-ship variants of its DF-21 and DF-26 ballistic missiles capable of holding U.S. surface vessels at risk. The United States should invest and deploy the next generation of attack submarines (SSNs) equipped with both conventional and nuclear munitions in sufficient numbers to hold China's force at risk.[69]

Because of the limitations of forward basing, the United States should focus on deploying those capabilities that can quickly disrupt Chinese military endeavors at the outset of conflict. For example, due to geography, there are a few choke points through the first island chain, such as the Bashi Channel and the Miyako Strait, which are critical for the PLA Navy to enter the open

Pacific.[70] Deploying capabilities, such as SSNs or sea mines, that can quickly cut off these waterways may be critical in disrupting PLA military activities at the start of an engagement, denying China its preferred method of warfare. This also requires U.S. leadership to be prepared to accept risk and act decisively at the outset of conflict.

3. Increase the resiliency of allies and partners, globally, with a stake in the rules-based international order. One of the greatest U.S. advantages is its allies and partners. Often referred to as the hub and spoke system, the United States maintains a series of bilateral alliances in the Pacific. First cultivated after World War II, this alliance system has adapted in the post-Cold War world and is still a robust aspect of U.S. foreign policy. However, China's strategic ambitions and its buildup of nuclear capability to assist in achieving them are a global concern. Therefore, the United States should build alliances and partnerships globally to balance and challenge Chinese ambitions.

For alliances to be successful, nations need shared values and a common vision for the security environment. While China's territorial expansion may be a primary security concern for regional allies, global partners may not have sufficient stake in these issues to counter China. However, issues that are critical to global allies and partners are China's stated goal to change the rules-based international order, human rights violations and undermining democratic governments. These issues can serve as a bedrock to build stronger relationships to counter Chinese attempts to alter the current system. For example, recognizing the challenge that China poses, for the first time NATO addressed it in a joint statement in 2019, writing, "We recognize that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance."[71]

China is the world's second largest economy and a valuable global trading partner. However, it often uses economic coercion to bully nations that challenge its goals and actions. To counter these tactics, the United States, allies and partners need to be both resilient and willing to punish coercive tactics. To build resiliency, the United States and allies should strengthen their economies to provide alternative markets for goods and services. This will decrease dependence on Chinese markets, weakening China's coercive tools. Further, nations should work together to punish China's coercive tactics, such as banding together to take complaints to the World Trade Organization (WTO) or joint action to impose tariffs on critical goods that China imports.[72] By building resiliency and working together, nations can deny China the benefits of economic coercion, while increasing the costs of doing so. This will put the United States, allies and partners in a better position to challenge China's ambitions to change the rules-based international order by making them less vulnerable to Chinese coercive tactics.

Finally, the hub and spoke alliance system needs to be modernized. While it is imperative for the United States to remain a leader of the global order, its allies and partners need to build stronger more committed relationships with each other as well. Building stronger relationships

between allies and partners will make it more difficult for China to exploit seams and fissures in U.S. relationships. A prime example of this is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, comprised of Australia, India, Japan and the United States. While not a formal alliance, the Quad recognizes their shared interests in the region and need to challenge China's influence.[73] Another example is AUKUS, an enhanced security relationship among Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, that seeks to "deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, including by working with partners, to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century."[74] Enhancing relationships between allies and partners will strengthen the ability to challenge China's strategic ambitions.

4. Actively identify Chinese malign activities and promote U.S. and allied commitment to the region through a robust strategic communications campaign. According to the Department of Defense's *Strategic Communications Joint Operating Concept*, strategic communications are "focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power."[75] This is absolutely critical to build a global consensus to challenge the growth of China's nuclear forces, condemn China's use of its nuclear forces for coercion, and bring attention to China's malign activities globally.

China has an active strategic communications mission that seeks to "shape international public narratives, weaken the enemy's will, shape diplomatic and political narratives, and advance the PRC's interests."[76] Countering this campaign will strengthen the ability to deny China its preferred objectives. Further, establishing a robust strategic communications plan, coordinated with allies and partners, will undergird the other objectives of this strategy, while challenging China's ability to operate freely in the information sphere. Actively communicating U.S. and allied stakes in the rules-based international order will hinder China's ability to actively undermine it.

Implementation

This strategy seeks to address China's nuclear arms build-up holistically. By integrating nuclear deterrence with conventional deterrence and warfighting capabilities, building coalitions of like-minded nations with a stake in the current international order, and actively identifying China's malign behavior and communicating allied stakes, this strategy will undermine China's ability to use its nuclear weapons in a coercive manner to achieve its global ambitions.

Conclusion

The growth of China's nuclear arsenal, in both size and sophistication, will have a significant impact on the safety and security of the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the maintenance of the rules-based international order. As China continues to grow its nuclear force and integrate it with its conventional capability, it will increase China's ability to use nuclear coercion to achieve its strategic ambitions at a lower level of escalation. This will have a significant impact on the Indo-Pacific region and the rules-based international order.

While a robust U.S. nuclear deterrent is imperative to address this issue, it must be integrated with other elements of U.S. national power in order to challenge China effectively. Segregating nuclear weapons issues undermines the U.S. ability to accurately assess the problem that it faces, as well as diminishing the ability of the United States to respond to the security issue. By creating a holistic, integrated strategy, the United States, allies and partners can effectively address the unprecedented growth of China's nuclear capabilities and challenge its ability to use its expanded arsenal to achieve its strategic ambitions.

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