

Chinese Media Analysis Suggests Chinese Military Closing the Gap on United States

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OE Watch Commentary

*South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, Hong Kong’s prominent online English-language daily, recently published an article comparing China’s military might to that of the United States. The article, which derived its data from various international sources, also examined some of the steps China is taking to become a modern fighting force within the next six years. In all, for many of the comparisons, *SCMP* analysis suggests that China’s current military weakness in certain areas can potentially be overcome.

In some cases, the article argues, China appears to be stronger but may not be. For example, with 360 ships, China is said to have the world’s largest navy. However, smaller coastal patrol ships weigh heavily in the count and the country has fewer large warships than the United States. On the other hand, according to the article, China plans to launch two dozen large warships, including corvettes, destroyers, and huge amphibious landing docks. It is also planning to launch a third aircraft carrier equipped “with the most advanced electromagnetic launch catapults” and to start working on a fourth carrier this year.

Additionally, international treaties could pave the way for China to gain the advantage. According to the article, China is believed to currently have fewer nuclear warheads than the United States. However, the article’s analysis argues that the U.S.-Russia agreement to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty to 2026 and restrict Russian and U.S. deployed strategic nuclear warheads could help China to close the gap. Meanwhile, “while the US has far more nuclear warheads, China has a virtual monopoly in one area: ground-based ballistic missiles that can carry out both nuclear and conventional strikes.”

Finally, the article points out that China is making strides in other areas. For example, it currently lags behind in military spending. However, the country has been steadily increasing its defense funding each year over the past two decades and announced a 6.8 percent increase for this year. In another example, the J-20, China’s indigenous stealth fighter, has limited speed and combat ability compared to others, but due to “a high-thrust turbofan engine,” they likely can be more easily mass produced.

“China is pushing ahead with plans to turn the People’s Liberation Army into a modern fighting force by 2027 – the centenary of its founding – as tensions with the US build.”

Comparing China and U.S. Military Strengths	China	United States
Total Manpower	2 million active (2019)	1.35 million active & 800,000 reserve
Budget	\$252 billion (2020)	\$778 billion (2020)
Number of Ground Forces	915,000 (however updated equipment or ability to operate are still lacking)	486,000
Number of Tanks/Global Rank	5,800/3	6,333/2
Number of Aircraft/Global Rank	2,500/3	13,000/1
Navy Fleet	360 Ships	297 Ship
Aircraft Carriers/Aircraft	2/36	11/60
Nuclear Arsenal Estimate	1,000 (100 active)	5,800 (3,000 ready and 1,400 on alert)

Snapshot comparing military strengths between China and the United States.  
Source: Chart created by the author and based on information derived from the article. Attribution: Public Domain

## Continued: Chinese Media Analysis Suggests Chinese Military Closing the Gap on United States

**Source:** Ziyu Zhang, “US China Rivalry: Who Has the Stronger Military?” *South China Morning Post*, (Hong Kong’s most prominent online English-language daily), 12 July 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3140681/us-china-rivalry-who-has-stronger-military>

*China is pushing ahead with plans to turn the People’s Liberation Army into a modern fighting force by 2027 – the centenary of its founding – as tensions with the US build.*

*The US is by far the world’s biggest spender, with a budget estimated at US\$778 billion last year, accounting for 39 per cent of total global military expenditure, according to data released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. China was a distant second with an estimated expenditure of US\$252 billion. However...China announced a 6.8 per cent increase in defence funding this year following more than two decades of steady increases.*

*China’s most advanced stealth fighter jet is the independently developed J-20, also known as the Mighty Dragon. While designed to compete with the US F-22s, these have been using stopgap engines that limit their speed and combat abilities. But work on a high-thrust turbofan engine which could speed up mass production of the planes is ongoing.*

*The two countries are also working on new bombers, with China developing its Xian H-20 strategic bomber.*

*China now has the world’s largest navy, with about 360 ships compared with the US fleet of 297, according to a US Congressional report.*

*But China’s numerical advantage is down to smaller vessels, such as coastal patrol ships... China has just two carriers – the Liaoning and Shandong. Both are based on the Soviet-designed Kuznetsov-class carrier of the 1980s and are powered by conventional oil-fired boilers and carry 24 to 36 J-15 fighter jets. However, China has an ambitious plan to equal US naval strength in the Pacific region, launching two dozen large warships – from corvettes and destroyers to huge amphibious landing docks – in 2019 alone. It plans to launch a third aircraft carrier equipped with the most advanced electromagnetic launch catapults and start work on a fourth this year.*

*China has not disclosed how many warheads it has, but the US Defence Department’s most recent report on the Chinese military stated that China’s warhead stockpile was “currently estimated to be in the low-200s”, while the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute put the number at 350 this year.*

*A source close to the Chinese military told (SCMP) in January that its stockpile of nuclear warheads had risen to 1,000 over recent years, but fewer than 100 of them were active.*

*China may have the chance to close the nuclear gap after the United States and Russia agreed earlier this year to extend their New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty to 2026. The treaty restricts both Washington and Moscow to no more than 1,550 deployed strategic warheads each.*

*While the US has far more nuclear warheads, China has a virtual monopoly in one area: ground-based ballistic missiles that can carry out both nuclear and conventional strikes.*

*The US was banned from deploying ground-based intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with the Soviet Union, which it only withdrew from in August 2019.*

**Source:** Kristin Huang, “China’s Mysterious H-20 Strategic Bomber ‘May Be Able to Strike Second Island China,’” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong’s most prominent online English-language daily), 25 May 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3134609/chinas-mysterious-h-20-strategic-bomber-may-be-able-strike>

*China’s next-generation Xian H-20 strategic bomber may have adopted a stealthy flying wing design that can help it strike targets in the second island chain and beyond...The bomber has been under development for years...*

*...four pictures suggested that the aircraft has a weapon bay, two adjustable tail wings, and airborne radar at the front and two stealth air intakes on both sides, all covered in a dark grey radar-absorbent material.*

*Previous reports had said that the H-20 would be equipped with nuclear and conventional missiles, have a maximum take-off weight of at least 200 tonnes and a payload of up to 45 tonnes, and was expected to fly at subsonic speeds and potentially fire four powerful hypersonic stealth cruise missiles.*

*...the strategic kind of advantage of (the H-20) aircraft is that it would be able to strike as what they call a strategic bomber, so it will be able to strike targets a long distance away, perhaps in the second island chain and beyond...*

*“Armed with nuclear and conventional stand-off missiles, the H-20 would represent a major break from previous [People’s Liberation Army Air Force] doctrine and equipment development practice,” the report (by the London-based Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies) said.*