

China Likely To Boost Nuclear Triad

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

The following article, published in *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, anticipates that China is going to upgrade its air-, ground-, and sea-based nuclear delivery platforms to fulfill President Xi Jinping's recent call for a "strong system of strategic deterrence." *SCMP*, Hong Kong's most prominent online English daily, based its information on interviews with various Chinese defense analysts. Zhou Chenming, a researcher with the Yuan Wang military science and technology think tank in Beijing, said that deterrence through conventional weapons during the Russia-Ukraine conflict revealed weakness on the battlefield, with both sides locked in endless fights and neither one able to use aircraft and tanks to overwhelm the other.¹ In contrast, according to Song Zhongping, a defense commentator and former instructor for the People's Liberation Army Rocket Forces, "Russia's powerful nuclear triad" had "deterred the U.S. and NATO from direct combat with the Russian military." Therefore, analysts see further boosting China's nuclear triad as a wise option.

To do so, Zhou Chenming argued that developing the Xian H-20 supersonic stealth bomber will help to further boost China's nuclear triad. While Chinese authorities

over the past years have remained tight-lipped about its capabilities and progress in development, Chinese experts expect it to have good stealth characteristics to provide defense penetration capabilities; a range of about 10,000 km, extendable through aerial refueling; both nuclear and conventional capability; and a fully advanced electronic warfare capability.² According to the *SCMP* excerpt, the H-20 is expected to double China's nuclear strike range. Zhou Bo, a senior fellow at Tsinghua University's Center for International Security and Strategy, explained that China's nuclear arsenal has always been smaller than that of the United States and Russia.³ Therefore, China "must modernize its capabilities" and increase its nuclear arsenal to become more effective. In contrast, according to Zhou Chenming, because of China's "no first use" policy, the country does not need to expand its nuclear arsenal because China's second-strike capability is "powerful enough to destroy the globe."

China's second-strike capability is powerful enough to destroy the globe.

Source: Minnie Chan, "Upgrades for China's Nuclear Triad as Xi Jinping Pushes for Stronger Strategic Deterrence: Analysts," *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong Chinese daily, once considered independent but now suspect of promoting China soft power abroad), 29 October 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3197705/upgrades-chinas-nuclear-triad-xi-jinping-pushes-stronger-strategic-deterrence-analysts>

Defence experts say China is expected to upgrade its air, ground and sea-based nuclear delivery systems – or nuclear triad – following President Xi Jinping's call for a "strong system of strategic deterrence."

Defence analysts said the Ukraine war and an increasingly uncertain global order had reminded Beijing that conventional weapons were not enough for real "strategic deterrence."

"Deterrence with conventional weapons revealed their weakness on the battlefield of the Ukraine war, which has seen the Russian military and Ukraine's NATO-aided forces locked in endless fights, as neither could use aircraft and tanks to overwhelm each other," said Zhou Chenming, a researcher with the Yuan Wang military science and technology think tank in Beijing.

China's strategic deterrence will be significantly upgraded once the H-20 is put into service...

Chinese military magazines and social media suggested the H-20's maiden flight could happen this year, but Beijing has been reluctant to announce any progress on the bomber.

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Zhou Chenming of the Yuan Wang think tank said that Beijing's best option was to raise the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, rather than expand its nuclear arsenal and trigger an arms race.

"Since Beijing has promised to maintain its 'no first use' policy, China doesn't need to expand its nuclear arsenal, as its nuclear technology is now on a par with the US and Russia, meaning China's second-strike capability is also powerful enough to destroy the globe," Zhou said.

Notes:

[1] The “Yuan Wang military science and technology think tank” can also be referred to as “Beijing Yuanwang Military Technology Think Tank” [北京远望军事科技智库] or simply “Yuan Wang Think Tank.” It appears to be an independent Chinese think tank that focuses on cutting-edge technology and highlights aspects of defense.

[2] See Zhang Lijun and Li Wei, “中国新一代远程轰炸机拥有五大突出特点 (The Five Outstanding Features of China’s New Generation of Long-range Bombers),” *China Youth Daily* (newspaper of the Communist Youth League of China), 16 February 2017. http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2017-02/16/nw.D110000zgqnb_20170216_1-12.htm

[3] China is estimated to have 200 to 300 nuclear warheads.