

The Big Read Nuclear proliferation

China's nuclear build-up: 'one of the largest shifts in geostrategic power ever'



The US believes Beijing will quadruple its warhead arsenal by 2030. Could this alter the balance of power in Asia?

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington 9 HOURS AGO

On July 27, China became the first nation to fly a [hypersonic glide vehicle](#) — a manoeuvrable craft that travels at more than five times the speed of sound — around the earth.

The vehicle was propelled by a rocket that can fly over the South Pole, evading US missile defences which are focused on the North Pole — and giving the [Chinese](#) another way to hit targets in America.

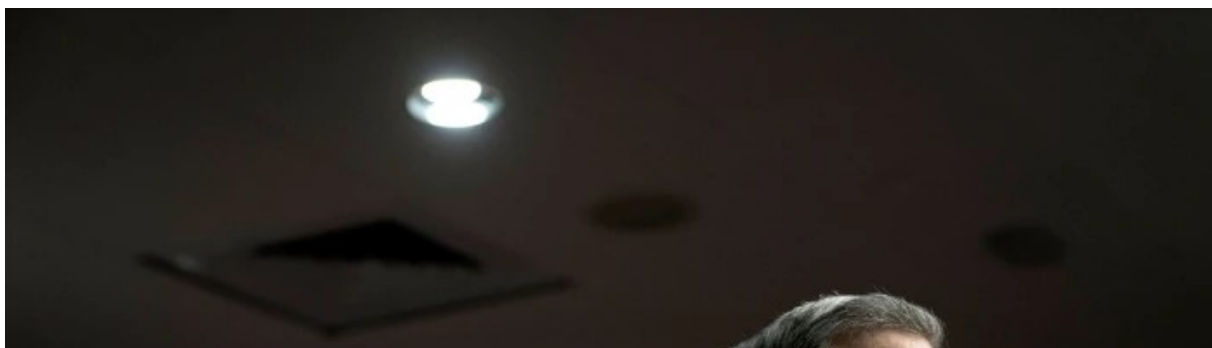
This test was the latest in a [series of revelations](#) about China's growing nuclear capabilities that have set off multiple alarm bells in Washington. Earlier this month, the Pentagon said it believes China has accelerated its nuclear plans and will quadruple its arsenal to at least 1,000 warheads by 2030.

Over the last two decades, China has stunned Washington with the relentless pace of its conventional military build-up, ranging from fighter jets and bombers to submarines and warships. Its navy is now by far the largest in the world.

But the combination of the hypersonic test and the warhead warning has now focused attention on a potentially dramatic shift taking place in Beijing's nuclear posture.

Military leaders in Washington face two critical questions. After decades of gradual increases in its nuclear forces, is China pivoting to a less defensive approach that has the potential to significantly alter the balance of power in East Asia? And could this enable China to win a conflict with the US over Taiwan by neutralising the threat from American nuclear weapons?

General Mark Milley, chair of the US joint chiefs, described the test, which was first reported by the Financial Times, as very close to a "[Sputnik moment](#)", referring to the Soviet Union putting a satellite in space in 1957.





Mark Milley, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, says the US urgently needs to develop its military capabilities to keep pace with large shifts in the global landscape © Stefani Reynolds/Bloomberg

“We’re witnessing one of the largest shifts in geostrategic power that the world has ever experienced,” Milley tells the FT.

“This shift is occurring alongside a fundamental change in the character of war,” Milley adds. “We need to act with urgency to develop capabilities across all domains — land, sea, air, space, cyber and our strategic nuclear forces — to address this evolving global landscape. We have to act now. Otherwise, we risk condemning our future generations to failure.”

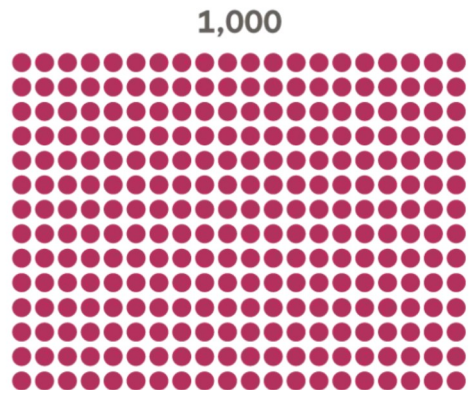
While the Pentagon monitors the full range of military expansion being conducted by the People’s Liberation Army, the nuclear scale-up has commanded huge attention because it has happened so quickly.

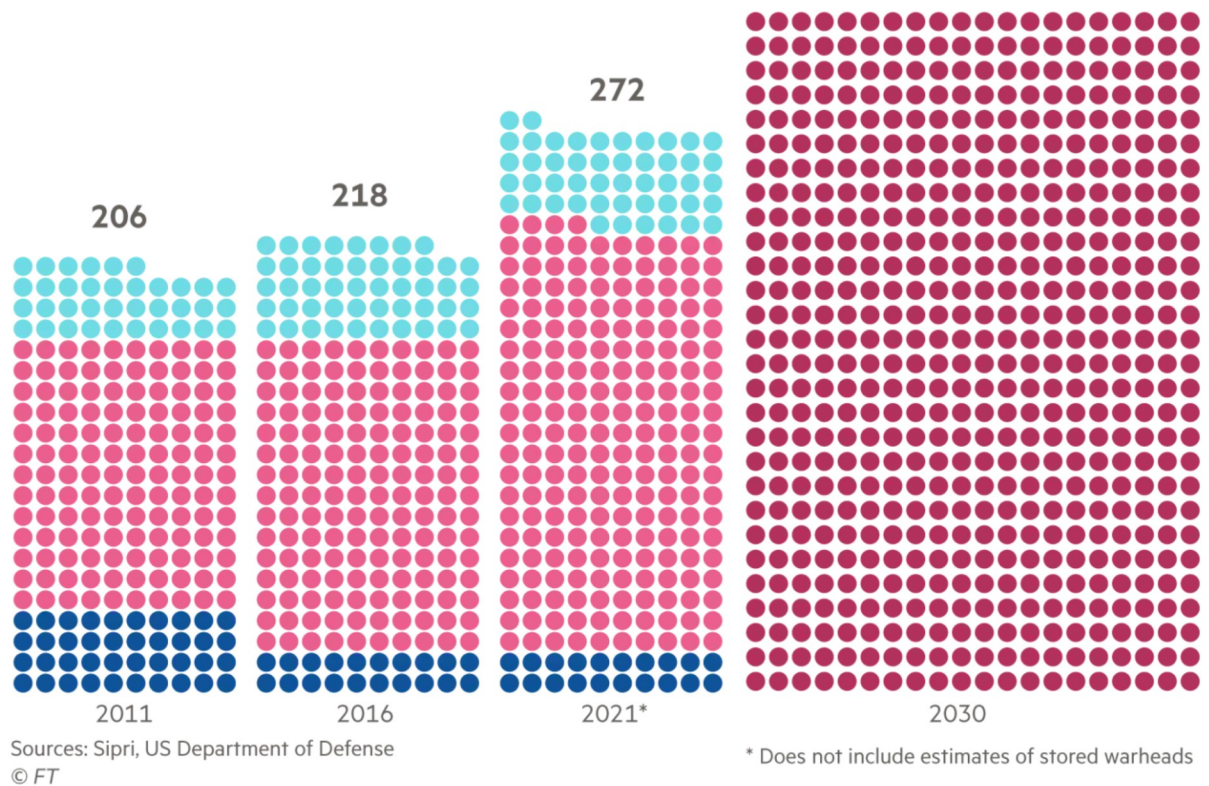
Admiral Charles Richard, who commands US nuclear forces as head of Strategic Command, in August said the word “breathtaking may not be enough” to describe the expansion. General John Hyten, vice-chair of the joint chiefs of staff, recently added his own warning about the implications.

“All the [hypersonic weapons](#) they’re building, all of the nuclear weapons they’re building, are not meant for their own population,” Hyten said. “It’s meant for the US . . . We have to assume that, and we have to plan for that.”

Estimates of China’s nuclear warhead stockpiles

- Aircraft
- Land-based missiles
- Sea-based missiles
- 2021 Pentagon report estimates for 2030





Yet the Chinese expansion also plays into a debate in Washington about how the US should restructure its nuclear forces. Jeffrey Lewis, a non-proliferation expert at Middlebury Institute of International Studies, says China's build-up has exposed the self-defeating outcome of US policy.

“The Bush and Obama administrations claimed that if we kept a nuclear weapons stockpile three or four times bigger than China, Beijing would be dissuaded from trying to match the US,” he says. “How’s that working out?”

Mutual vulnerability

Since China conducted its first atomic bomb test in 1964, it has maintained a minimum deterrence policy underpinned by a [“lean and effective nuclear force”](#). It was tailored to ensure that China, which has a [“no first use”](#) policy, had just enough nuclear weapons to retaliate against any first strike.

In a development that would mark a major milestone, the Pentagon said China may now have a “nascent” [nuclear triad](#) — meaning land, sea and air-launched missiles — after it deployed a nuclear-capable bomber last year.



The hypersonic glide vehicle was launched with a 'Long March' rocket, seen here carrying the Shenzhou-13 spacecraft with three astronauts in October © Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

The PLA is also developing new intercontinental ballistic missiles that would carry multiple warheads, and is constructing hundreds of silos for land-based ICBMs. It also tested 250 ballistic missiles in 2020 — more than the rest of the world combined.

The Pentagon said China operationally fielded the [DF-17](#), a medium-range missile

“You don’t need to develop the kind of capabilities they’re developing for minimum deterrence,” [Hyten said](#).

Accelerating pace of weapons development

Nuclear-capable bomber



2021: The H-6N nuclear bomber was deployed for the first time in 2020

Nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines



2020: China has 4
2021: China has 6 and could have 8 by 2030

Hypersonic glide vehicle

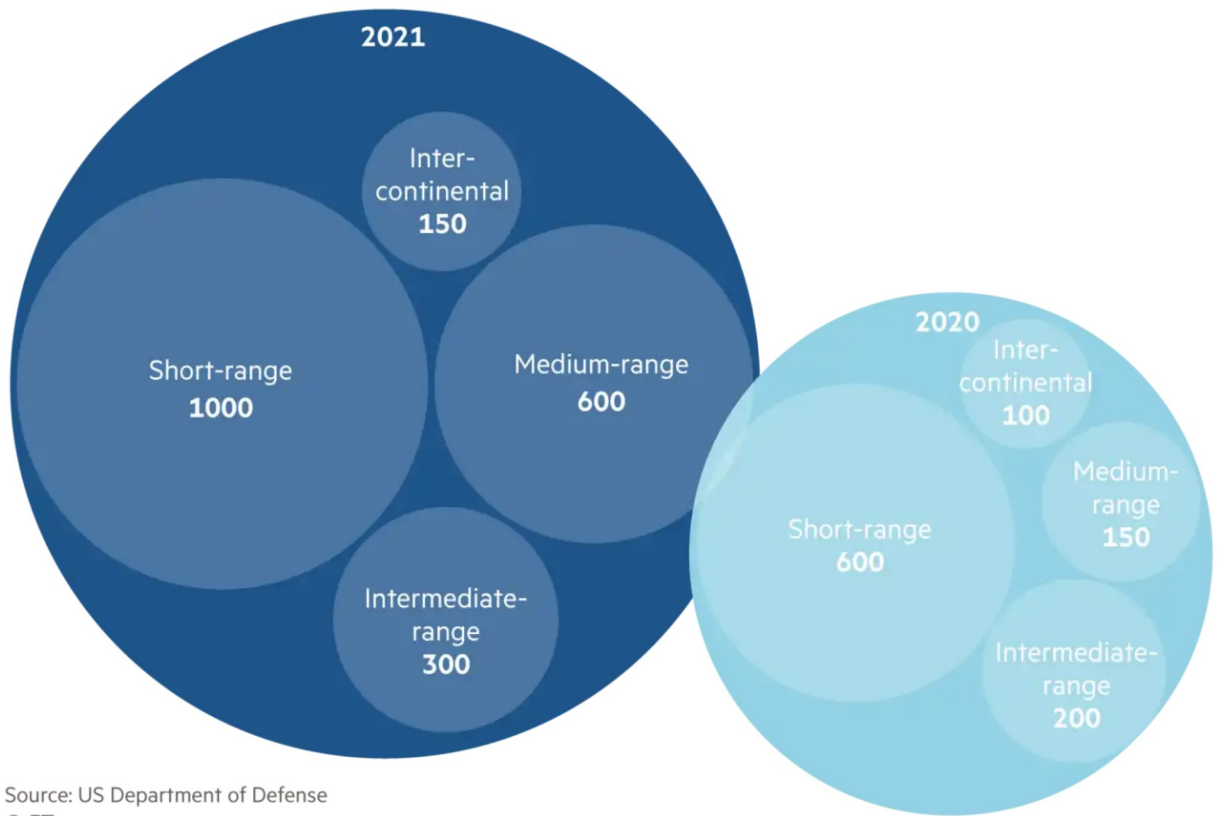


2021: The DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle was deployed for the first time in 2020

Source: US Department of Defense
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Some experts say China is enhancing its retaliatory capability to counter US advances in areas such as missile defence. China has become increasingly concerned about this since 2002 when the Bush administration pulled out of the Anti-ballistic missile

The Pentagon adjusts its estimates for the growth of China's ballistic missile arsenal



Source: US Department of Defense
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A Taiwanese Air Force F-16 in the foreground flies on the flank of a Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force H-6 bomber as it passes near Taiwan © Republic of China (ROC) Ministry of National Defense via AP





