

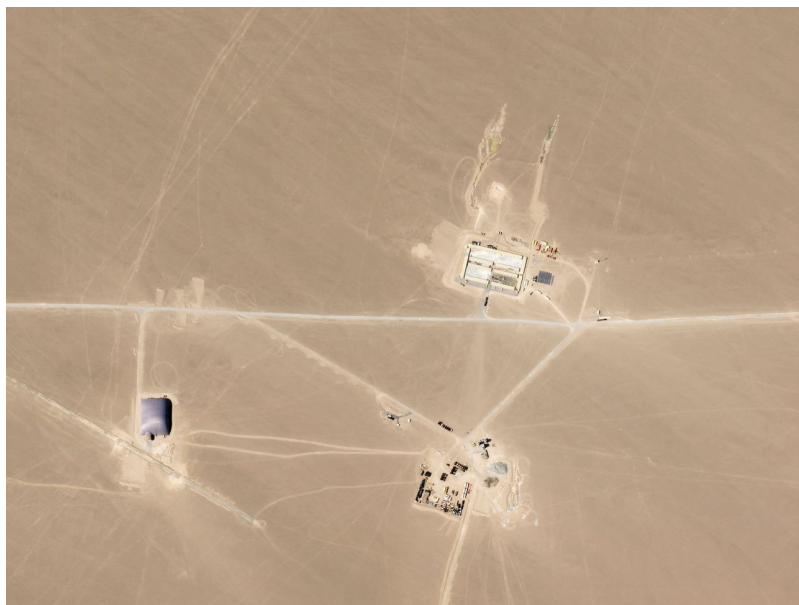
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◆ **WSJ NEWS EXCLUSIVE** CHINA

China Has More ICBM Launchers Than U.S., American Military Reports

While the U.S. leads in intercontinental missiles and warheads, China's gains are fueling debate in Congress



An earlier satellite image shows what analysts believe is construction on an intercontinental ballistic missile silo near Hami, China.

PHOTO: PLANET LABS INC./ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *Michael R. Gordon* [Follow](#)

Updated Feb. 7, 2023 9:41 am ET

The U.S. military has notified Congress that China now has more land-based intercontinental-range missile launchers than the U.S., fueling the debate about how Washington should respond to Beijing's nuclear buildup.

“The number of land-based fixed and mobile ICBM launchers in China exceeds the number of ICBM launchers in the United States,” the commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, which oversees nuclear forces, wrote the Senate's and House's Armed Services Committees on Jan. 26.

The notification comes as the U.S. is facing the challenge of deterring Russia's substantial nuclear forces as well as China's growing nuclear arsenal. U.S. lawmakers are involved in an increasingly heated debate about how best to counter Beijing, including the Pentagon's response to the Chinese surveillance

balloon that recently traversed the U.S. and hovered over Montana, where a portion of the American military's ICBM arsenal is deployed.



The suspected Chinese spy balloon drifts to the ocean after being shot down off the coast South Carolina.

PHOTO: RANDALL HILL/REUTERS

Many of China's land-based launchers still consist of empty silos, according to U.S. officials and experts outside government. The Strategic Command also notified Congress that the U.S. has more intercontinental-range, land-based missiles, and more nuclear warheads mounted on those missiles, than China.

The command's notifications also don't include submarine-launched missiles and long-range bombers, where the U.S. has a decided advantage, U.S. officials say.

Republican lawmakers, however, have cited the launchers as a portent of the scale of China's ambitions and are urging the U.S. to expand its own nuclear forces.

"China is rapidly approaching parity with the United States," said Rep. Mike Rogers, the Alabama Republican who chairs the House Armed Services Committee. "We cannot allow that to happen. The time for us to adjust our force posture and increase capabilities to meet this threat is now."

Mr. Rogers said that limits on long-range forces set by a treaty between the U.S. and Russia, known as New START, are inhibiting the U.S. from building up its arsenal to deter Russia and China. That accord, which China isn't party to, is set to expire in 2026.

Arms-control proponents say rather than trying to surpass China's and Russia's nuclear forces, the U.S. has more to gain by trying to preserve treaty limits with Russia and by attempting to draw Beijing into a discussion of nuclear-arms control.

They also note that the U.S. is undergoing a major modernization of its nuclear forces that will give Washington the option of adding more warheads to its missiles and bombers should China's buildup proceed faster than anticipated in the 2030s.

"It's in our national interest to keep the Russians under the New START limits. We need to complete our nuclear modernization according to plan, not pile on new requirements," said Rose Gottemoeller of Stanford University, who negotiated the landmark treaty for the U.S.

Mr. Rogers is expected to discuss the notification Tuesday morning at a House Armed Services Committee hearing on China and U.S. national defense.

The Biden administration has acknowledged that the challenges posed by nuclear-armed adversaries are complex and wants the U.S. to deal with them using a mix of arms control arrangements and upgraded nuclear forces.

"By the 2030s the United States will, for the first time in its history, face two major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries," the Pentagon said in a policy document known as the Nuclear Posture Review last year.

An immediate challenge for the administration is preserving the New START treaty, which limits the number of deployed Russian and American nuclear warheads and bombs to 1,550. The Biden administration said last week that Moscow is violating the accord by refusing to allow on-site inspections. Russian officials said Moscow is still adhering to the limits on warheads, missiles, bombers and launchers.





Rep. Mike Rogers (R, Ala.) says the U.S. needs to increase its capabilities to meet the threat from China now.

PHOTO: TOM WILLIAMS/ZUMA PRESS

China, which has rejected arms-control talks with the U.S., is on track to field about 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035, according to a Pentagon report that was released last year. That is roughly triple the number it has today.

China operates a fleet of mobile ICBM launchers and has about 20 liquid-fueled, silo-based missiles. It is also building three ICBM silo fields that are intended to house at least 300 modern solid-fueled missiles.

Researchers have debated whether China plans to fill all of the silos with nuclear-tipped ICBMS, whether some might be left empty or whether some might be filled with conventionally armed systems.

Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists said commercial satellite images of the Chinese silo fields provide no indication that China's military has been training to load the new silos with ICBMs or conducting exercises at the silo fields.

“They are building a significant number of silos, but we don't know how many missiles or warheads they are going to put in them,” Mr. Kristensen said.

The working presumption among most U.S. officials, however, is that all of the silos will be filled with nuclear-tipped intercontinental missiles over the next decade or so.

With uncertainty over China's nuclear plans rising, Congress last year passed legislation requiring the Strategic Command to notify lawmakers if Beijing had more ICBM silos, more ICBMS or more ICBM warheads than the U.S.

The command responded with classified and unclassified versions of the notification to Congress. The unclassified version, which came in a letter from Strategic Command leader Gen. Anthony Cotton, didn't say how the military assesses China will use the silos or how quickly Beijing might fill them with missiles.

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