

Nuclear proliferation

China pushes nuclear 'no first use' while expanding its atomic arsenal

Beijing's diplomatic offensive against US posture seen as blunting criticism of its own arms build-up



Chinese nuclear submarines. The Pentagon forecasts that China's nuclear arsenal will double to more than 1,000 warheads by 2030
© Reuters

Kathrin Hille in Taipei and **Max Seddon** in Riga YESTERDAY

China has launched a diplomatic offensive against the US nuclear weapons posture as it rapidly strengthens its own nuclear capabilities.

Beijing, the only one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council that has committed to not using nuclear weapons first, has called in Geneva for the others to match that pledge and has also denounced Washington's arrangements for deterring attacks on its allies.

In its formal proposal, [China](#) said a nuclear "no first use" policy was "increasingly becoming an important consensus and priority" in international arms control. But officials of the US and allied nations and analysts said Beijing's proposal and censure of the US and its allies were an attempt to blunt western criticism of its own nuclear arms build-up.

China submitted a draft text for a treaty or declaration on "no first use" by P5 Security Council members to a committee that is meeting in Geneva until Friday to prepare a review conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Beijing also called the protection the US offers European allies under nuclear sharing arrangements in Nato and Asian allies under its nuclear umbrella "serious violations"

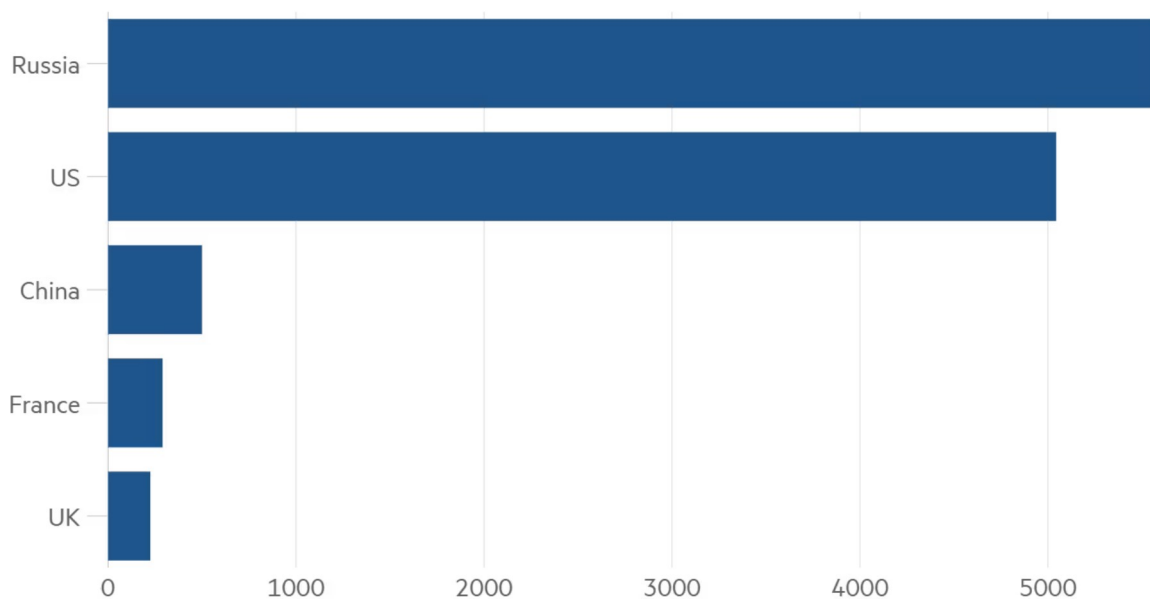
of the NPT and demanded that they be abolished.

The push comes as China is expanding its [arsenal of nuclear warheads](#) and modernising the forces for delivering them — moves some foreign officials believe could transform the country into a nuclear power on par with the US and Russia.

The Pentagon [forecasts China's arsenal](#) will grow to more than 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030, double the current estimated number and four times what it estimated before the build-up began about six years ago.

Nuclear forces of UN Security Council permanent members

■ Estimated total warheads by country, January 2024



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

Beijing has in recent years also been building missile silos and deploying more submarines that can carry nuclear warheads — giving it greater capacity to launch [nuclear weapons](#) on short notice rather than just as a retaliatory strike after being hit.

Those changes triggered debate among Chinese and foreign nuclear experts whether the country might shift from its own commitment to “no first use” and strategy of securing its defence with a minimum nuclear deterrent to a [more assertive posture](#).

Such suspicions have been fuelled by a lack of transparency as Beijing refuses to participate in arms control mechanisms that include limiting or verifying its own arsenal.

Last month, China suspended low-level discussions on nuclear arms control with the US, the first such exchanges in five years.

“By emphasising its unconditional NFU declaration, China aims to deflect international pressure to join official nuclear arms control talks. Beijing also gains moral high ground by promoting NFU globally, aware of the challenges other nuclear states face in adopting such a policy,” said Zhao Tong, senior fellow at the Carnegie think-tank.

Washington said Beijing’s “rapid and opaque build-up” of a more versatile nuclear arsenal called into question the objectives behind its proposal, especially as it refused meaningful discussions about arms control, risk reduction or even its own no first use policy.

“In this context, [China’s] proposal, which followed its cessation of bilateral consultations, appears likely to be an attempt to deflect responsibility for its unwillingness to engage in substantive discussions,” a state department spokesperson said.

Lyle Morris, senior fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute’s Center for China Analysis, said the US would “never agree” to China’s no first use proposal “due to its desire to flexibly respond to nuclear threats to Washington and our allies”.

“Given our extended nuclear commitment to allies, it doesn’t make political sense for Washington to make such a concession, especially given the opaque nature of China’s nuclear build-up,” said Morris, a former country director for China in the office of the US defence secretary.

Analysts said the P5 members UK and France were equally unlikely to agree because the ability to respond to a conventional attack with nuclear weapons was even more important to them due to their weaker conventional capabilities compared with the US.

“This is unfortunate, as a positive response to the Chinese proposal, even if falling short of outright endorsement, would isolate Russia and be seen as a positive step by the non-nuclear NPT parties,” said David Cullen, director of the Nuclear Information Service, a UK-based non-profit group.

After China first floated the NFU treaty idea in February, Russia, the final P5 member, said the initiative needed to be “looked at in the general context of military-political realities and in connection with other significant factors that affect international security and strategic stability”.

Moscow’s response indicated the proposal was incompatible with Russian doctrine

Moscow's response indicated the proposal was incompatible with Russian doctrine, which allows for nuclear first use in response to a conventional attack that "threatens the very security of the state", said William Alberque, a visiting fellow at the Stimson Center in Washington.

Russia has made thinly veiled hints at potential nuclear use throughout its full-scale invasion of Ukraine to deter western countries from arming Kyiv with advanced weaponry.

But analysts believe China's nuclear diplomacy push is playing well among many countries beyond the permanent Security Council members. "It is an effort to buy some goodwill from the international community, and frankly, it's working," said David Santoro, president of the Pacific Forum, a policy research institute in Hawaii and co-organiser of an unofficial US-China nuclear policy dialogue.

"Most countries are worried about Russia and North Korea. But there is little discussion about China's nuclear expansion," Santoro said about the Geneva meeting. "So they're doing really well: building up their arsenal but getting no heat for it."

Additional reporting by John Paul Rathbone in London

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
