

Chinese military

China is rapidly expanding nuclear forces, says Pentagon

US defence department reports that Beijing has increased operational nuclear warhead arsenal by 20% in a year



The Pentagon's annual 'China Military Power Report' said the People's Liberation Army was also developing new intercontinental ballistic missiles © Jason Lee/Reuters

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington YESTERDAY

China has increased its arsenal of operational nuclear warheads to 600 from 500 in just a year, as the People's Liberation Army continues a rapid expansion of its forces, according to the US defence department.

In its annual "China Military Power Report", the Pentagon said the [PLA](#) had expanded its arsenal by 20 per cent in the 12 months from mid-2023 and was on track to have 1,000 operational warheads by 2030.

The Pentagon has in recent years warned that the US will soon face two nuclear peers as [China's](#) arsenal grows closer in size to the US and Russia.

China has not denied increasing the size of its nuclear forces but dismisses US concern about the issue, saying Washington uses it as a pretext for its pursuit of "absolute strategic predominance".

The Pentagon report estimated that China would continue to increase its nuclear forces until at least 2035. But it did not repeat [its 2022 projection that the PLA was on track to have 1,500 warheads](#) by the middle of the next decade, a figure that would nearly match the number deployed by the US and Russia.





Chinese soldiers during a decontamination drill © CFOTO/NurPhoto/Reuters

A US defence official said the Pentagon was being cautious with its latest forecast.

“The further out we go . . . the more challenging it is to have a projection that you can have great confidence in, because there are so many variables that could cause them to adjust either what they think is necessary or what they’re able to do,” he said.

The report said the PLA Rocket Force, which manages most of China’s nuclear arsenal, was developing new intercontinental ballistic missiles that would significantly improve its nuclear-capable forces.

The report, which is mandated by Congress, comes as president-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office in January. Defence experts are waiting to see what approach he will take on China and Taiwan.

US officials believe President Xi Jinping has ordered the Chinese military to develop the capability to invade Taiwan by 2027, the centennial of the PLA’s founding. The defence official stressed the Pentagon did not believe an attack on Taiwan was “imminent or inevitable” and said the US had “deterrence today that’s real and strong”.

The report said the PLA had made “uneven progress” towards its modernisation goal for 2027.

The report said the PLA was experiencing a new “wave” of corruption in its senior ranks that “may have disrupted” progress towards the 2027 milestone. “It may have

shaken Beijing’s confidence in high-ranking PLA officials,” it concluded.

The Chinese defence ministry last month said Miao Hua, one of the top five military officers who command the PLA, had been [placed under investigation for “serious violations of discipline”](#).

The Financial Times reported last month that some US officials believe Chinese defence minister Dong Jun is also under investigation. The US official said he could not confirm or deny if Dong was being probed. Beijing has dismissed the claim. Dong’s two predecessors — Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu — have both been placed under investigation for corruption.

The Pentagon official said that in the second half of 2023 alone China removed at least 15 high-level military officials and defence industry executives, including the head of the PLA Rocket Force.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said in August that Beijing’s nuclear strategy focused on self-defence, that it always kept its nuclear capabilities at the “minimum level required by national security”.

“It is the US who is the primary source of nuclear threats and strategic risks in the world,” Mao said.

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