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## China's Ballistic Missiles: A Force to be Reckoned With

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COMMENTARY

By Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins

China dislikes U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) developments, existing and potential. Ballistic missiles have long represented one of China's greatest military strengths, and it does not want them, or the nuclear weapons that they can deliver, negated. Resigned to the fact that the U.S. cannot be forced to halt development of its missile defense systems or reduce its focus on the Asia-Pacific, Beijing appears to be offering selective reminders that its missile forces are growing too strong to contain.

On Thursday, The Wall Street Journal reported that the U.S. plans to enhance its missile defense systems in the Asia-Pacific. Notably, a day prior to that report, images appeared on Chinese government web portal purporting to show a possible new ICBM, termed the DF-41. The website cited a U.S. article claiming that China tested the DF-41 on July 24.



Associated Press

In this photo taken Sunday, Sept. 6, 2009, Chinese made Self-propelled 155mm Howitzers at left and trucks with a DF21 medium range ballistic missile, in front and a DF31 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, at right making their way to a military parade rehearsal for the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic held in Beijing,

This may be part of a growing pattern in which Chinese entities engage in selective transparency concerning emerging weapons systems to rally citizens at home and deter potential opponents abroad.

Another recent example includes claims in a popular newspaper that a conventional ballistic missile with a range of 2500 miles, sufficient to

strike Guam, will be "ready for service" by 2015, and that the carrier-targeting DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) is already deployed. While the first missile's status cannot be verified, Taiwan's annual defense report confirms that "a small quantity of" DF-21D ASBMs "were produced and deployed in 2010." Meanwhile, an article posted on the website of China's Ministry of National Defense states that the "PLA should foster offensive defense thinking in developing long-range strike weapons."

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These explicit examples and implicit claims of Chinese missile prowess hardly represent paper tigers or empty talk. Building on a foundation of focused missile development since the late 1950s, Beijing is backing these data points up with substantive action. According to the latest U.S. National Air and Space Intelligence Center report on foreign ballistic and cruise missile capabilities ([pdf](#)), China is “developing and testing offensive missiles, forming additional missile units, qualitatively upgrading certain missile systems, and developing methods to counter ballistic missile defenses.” The U.S. Department of Defense’s 2010 unclassified report on China’s military states that “China has the most active land-based ballistic and cruise missile program in the world.” While this year’s report ([pdf](#)) was disappointing in its lack of detail, Chinese activities of late have only reinforced the Defense Department’s assessment.

Most distinctive in independent deployment potential and significant in overall capability are China’s nuclear and conventional ballistic missiles, which are controlled by the Second Artillery Force. With armament of the Chinese navy’s three deployed Type 094 ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) awaiting final testing of the JL-2 [submarine-launched ballistic missile](#) (SLBM), land-based ballistic missiles are currently the sole delivery system for China’s nuclear weapons. As such, Beijing is determined to ensure their ability to penetrate the defense systems of potential opponents.

The goal is to ensure a secure second-strike capability that could survive in the worst of worst-case conflict scenarios, whereby an opponent would not be able to eliminate China’s nuclear capability by launching a first strike and would therefore face potential retaliation. As the U.S. Defense Department’s Ballistic Missile Defense Review [points out](#), “China is one of the countries most vocal about U.S. ballistic missile defenses and their strategic implications, and its leaders have expressed concern that such defenses might negate China’s strategic deterrent.” In Beijing’s view, maintaining second strike capability can deter other powerful militaries from pressuring or attacking China in the first place.

In addition to homeland defense, specific roles [envisioned](#) for China’s ballistic missiles include preventing Taiwan from pursuing independence, maximizing Chinese leverage in territorial and maritime disputes, and discouraging the U.S. from intervening in regional crises or conflicts stemming from these or other issues.

Modest investment in ballistic missile defense offers the U.S. valuable technology development, general deterrence and some level of protection against dangerous regimes possessing limited ballistic missile capabilities, such as those of North Korea and Iran.

But while useful for other purposes, missile defense encourages, rather than dissuades, Chinese [improvement](#) of strategic nuclear forces.

Beijing can build so many missiles, at such an affordable cost, as to exceed the interception capability of any conceivable missile defense system. Attempting to overcome this reality would risk entering the U.S. into a race that it could not afford to wage, let alone win. China’s military overall still has weaknesses such areas as training and real-time coordination of sensors, but the SAF enjoys particular strengths in these respects as well and should not be



Getty Images/U.S. Navy

Two modified Standard Missile 2 Block IV interceptors are launched from the guided-missile cruiser USS Lake Erie during a successful test of the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense Program, June 5, 2008.

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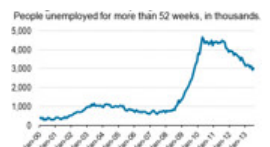
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underestimated.

Ballistic missile defense cannot be used to deny China secure second-strike—a capability that Beijing is determined, and able, to achieve ([pdf](#)). In fact, U.S. senior leaders frequently emphasize to Chinese leaders that U.S. missile defense systems do not have the technical capacity to do anything but stop a few missiles (and not even of the variety that China deploys), and are not aimed at preventing China from achieving secure second strike.

“Today, only Russia and China have the capability to conduct a large-scale ballistic missile attack on the territory of the United States, but this is very unlikely and not the focus of U.S. BMD,” the Ballistic Missile Defense Review explains. “Both Russia and China have repeatedly expressed concerns that U.S. missile defenses adversely affect their own strategic capabilities and interests. The United States will continue to engage them on this issue to help them better understand the stabilizing benefits of missile defense.”

China and Russia remain worried about whether or not they can believe or rely upon these assurances. Reasons include not only strategic distrust of the U.S. generally, but also possible advances in technology and—from their perspective, at least—the uncertainty surrounding whether a future U.S. administration of a different political persuasion might adopt a very different approach. Moreover, political actors in both China and Russia derive benefits from ignoring these assurances and exploit these issues for political gain.

Even with ongoing concerns and enduring differences in national interests, it behooves Washington and Beijing to attempt over time to enhance discussion of the sensitive and important subject of strategic deterrence. To be sure, dialogue is a two-way endeavor and will only be as productive as the sum of the efforts that both sides invest in it. Yet, as disappointing as results have been so far, the alternative to continued efforts at substantive discussion—the risk of misperception through disengagement—is far worse.



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