

How the Department of Defense looks at the Chinese military system: Edition 2017

Since 2000, in an annual report delivered to the Congress, the Department of Defense analyzes the military and security modernization processes and explains the strategic vision of the People's Republic of China. In this new edition, the People's Republic of China is portrayed as seeking to pursue a multi-dimensional, very complex, and long-term modernization program principally aimed to improve its armed forces' ability to fight and win short-term high-intensity regional conflicts. Getting ready for a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait, especially in order to dissuade or defeat any third-country intervention, remains the most important goal of Chinese military investment. However, with the increasing international relevance of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese military system seems to be slowly pursuing the quite more ambitious purpose to become able of effectively face many different contingencies, even very far from its land and maritime borders. Overall, the 2017 issue of the *Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China* is not fundamentally different from those delivered in recent years. However, the new document is not devoid of new and important contents. Among these is the news that the People's Republic of China is developing a new strategic bomber capable of carrying nuclear weapons to replace the old H-6, which would give the Chinese air force actual nuclear capabilities for the first time.

In addition, the 2017 report shows an intercontinental ballistic force significantly larger than the one at the center of previous editions, given that now tallies every single missile instead of their launch stations. According to this year's report, the number of Chinese inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) is relatively small but quite uncertain, ranging between seventy-five and one hundred. Of these, only the half is believed potentially capable of reaching the North American continental platform. Such an estimate is the same as the previous one, but exceeds by forty percent the one released in the 2015. As a result, this new report has met the same criticisms as the one published last year. Such an apparent confusion seems to be mostly owned to a change in terminology. From last year, the Defense Department would no longer record the number of operational launch facilities but the actual number of ICBMs available for launch. In this case, the structure of China's ICBM force would have remained relatively unchanged since 2011. Considering this different way of assessing the number of Chinese ICBM, the only innovation in the Chinese nuclear missile capabilities would be the release of two new models, DF-26 and DF-41, still very far away from any operational status. At the same time, the development of the mobile variant of still another ICBM, the DF-41, according to the 2017 report being equipped with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle capacities, as in the case of the DF-5B, continues. On the other hand, the report makes no mention of yet another ICBM, the DF-5C, of which has so much been spoken by the U.S. Media in recent months.

No variations are reported in the number of ballistic missile submarine with nuclear warheads (SSBN), frozen at four. However, a new class seems to be in advanced design phase.

The development of a new SSBN shows that the People's Republic of China is getting closer to having a nuclear deterrent that can survive a first strike. Along with the developing of the new long range nuclear bomber, the new SSBN is probably the most interesting part of this new document. In order to secure a nuclear second strike capability, Chinese SSBNs deployed at sea must be able to hide for most of their cruise, so to avoid the detection by the United States and Allied attack submarine, something very unlikely so far because Chinese SSBNs are believed to be rather noisy. In addition to that, these already strong doubts regarding such alleged second strike capability are

increased by the quite uncertain operational status of the JL-2; the Chinese submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

Wrapping all this up, with all probability this relatively early replacement process is the best evidence that the current SSBN fleet does not provide enough guarantees of survival. The new report of the Department of Defense explains that the future SSBN, which could enter production in the early years of the next decade, will also feature a new SLBM so far known as JL-3. The new missile will probably have a much longer range than the current JL-2, which should allow JL-3 to reach the United States already from the maritime expanses facing the Chinese continental shelf, something that would improve the survivability chances of any Chinese SSBN. Finally, the report concludes that both Chinese nuclear strategy and doctrine, despite a heated internal debate, are completely unchanged.

Chinese strategic objectives include the perpetuation of the Communist Party's rule, the maintenance of internal stability, support for economic growth and technological development, the defense of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the acquisition of a regional prominence, and the protection of their its own ever increasing overseas interests. The Department of Defense report on the Chinese military shows a country engaged in the enforcement of a defense strategy that emphasizes the need to act using coercive tactics also different from the armed conflict. The modernization of the Chinese military system is judged potentially able to weaken the technological advantage enjoyed by the United States. The People's Republic of China is shown looking to improve its military capabilities by acquiring technologies also through computer espionage and the exploitation of Chinese citizens who have access to these technologies abroad. In any case, the latest edition of the report also notes that China's annual military spending, taking into account inflation, has increased by about 8.5% per annum over the last ten years. And this despite the general slowdown faced by the Chinese economy over the same period.