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China Fields New Nuclear Arsenal

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The 70th-anniversary parade of the People's Republic of China held on October 1 reveals China's current nuclear thinking and threat perception. The nuclear weapons debuted during the parade, namely the Dong Feng 41 (DF-4) - China's longest range Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and the Ju Lang-2 (JL-2) Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) have been seen by defence analysts as indicative of China's growing assertiveness. The Chinese Communist Party-run newspaper, The Global Times, has described the parade as a demonstration of China's confidence and transparency.¹

The ICBM DF-41 that offers an operational range exceeding 14,000 kilometres is by far China's longest range weapon. It enables China to reach the United States - one of its prime adversaries - within the time frame of 30 minutes. This range allows China to surpass the range of the United States' LGM-30 Minuteman which has a reported range of 13,000 kilometres, thus making the DF-41 the world's longest range missile. Further, according to the British Think

Tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the DF-41 is reportedly capable of carrying multiple-independent re-entry vehicles (MIRV) or jammers and penetration aids.² The Global Times claims that DF-41 can carry about ten independently targetable nuclear warheads.³ However, some experts suggest that the purpose of the MIRVs is to ensure penetration of the US ballistic missile defence system than maximising its warhead capacity.⁴ Notwithstanding, as China continues to uphold the policy of No First Use, such modernisations are seen mainly as China's need to augment the credibility of its nuclear weapons, especially in response to the deployment of sophisticated ballistic missile defence systems by other nuclear weapons state.

The JL-2, the other new induction in China's nuclear armoury, forms a standard weapon component for China's Jin Class nuclear power submarines. However, it has been long suspected that China has been conducting tests of the JL-2 from trial submarines since 2002 and the weapon became operational in 2014.⁵ The JL-2 has a range of 7,200 Kilometres and therefore

poses a threat to China's neighbourhood. Notwithstanding, the sources of China's regional insecurity, particularly in the strategic domain, emanate from the United States' military presence in the region, namely with the latter's deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) - a globally transportable ballistic missile defence system in South Korea. The Chinese insecurities continue to compound as the United States has also evinced plans to deploy ground-based missiles in the Asia Pacific region following its announcement to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces agreement it had signed with the Soviet Union in 1987. Many experts in China see these moves by the United States as a means to peer deep into China and extract sensitive military information in order to degrade China's security.⁶

In the grand scheme of things, the debut of DF-41 and JL-2 is seen by most observers as China's efforts to negate the United States' strategic dominance, as well as its presence in China's neighbourhood. With superior military might, China also seeks to enforce its claims on Taiwan and the South China Sea. This, however, does not indicate China's attempt to attain nuclear parity with the United States as far as the number of nuclear weapons is concerned: China continues to conform to its policy of 'minimum deterrence', wherein it takes a restrained attitude toward the development of nuclear weapons, and therefore it maintains minimum nuclear warheads.⁷ According to the latest

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) report, China possesses about 280 nuclear warheads as compared to 6,450 possessed by the United States.⁸

Further, the DF-41 and JL-2 don't have direct implications as far as South Asia is concerned: India may not feel impelled to develop longer range ICBMs exceeding the 5,800 Kilometres range offered by its Agni 5 ICBM which readily allows it to reach the northern frontiers of China; however, it may feel pressured to develop MIRV capable missiles in order to maintain parity with China in terms of its nuclear weapons capabilities.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

¹ "China's Grand Military Parade Showcases Confidence, Transparency, Stokes Patriotism." *Global Times*. Last modified October 1, 2019. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1165951.shtml>.

² "China's PLA: New Weapons, New Approaches." *IISS*. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2019/10/china-national-day-parade-pla>. Accessed October 12, 2019.

³ "China Debuts Most Advanced ICBM DF-41 at Parade." *Global Times*. Last modified October 1, 2019. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1165931.shtml>.

⁴ Kristensen, Hans M., and Matt Korda. "Chinese nuclear forces, 2019." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 75, no. 4 (July 2019), 171-178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2019.1628511>. Accessed October 12, 2019.

⁵ "China Showcases JL-2 Submarine-launched Ballistic Missile at 70th Anniversary Parade." *Defence & Security Intelligence & Analysis | Jane's 360*. Last modified September 30, 2019. <https://www.janes.com/article/91614/china-showcases->

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⁶ Michael D. Swaine. "Chinese Views on South Korea's deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Last modified February 2, 2017. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/02/chinese-views-on-south-korea-s-deployment-of-terminal-high-altitude-area-defense-thaad-pub-67891>.

⁷ Xia, Liping. "China's Nuclear Doctrine: Debates and Evolution." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Last modified June 30, 2016. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/china-s-nuclear-doctrine-debates-and-evolution-pub-63967>.

⁸ "Modernisation of World Nuclear Forces Continues Despite Overall Decrease in Number of Warheads" *SIPRI*. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2019/modernization-world-nuclear-forces-continues-despite-overall-decrease-number-warheads-new-sipri>. Accessed October 13, 2019.