

1. THE CHINA'S APPROACH TO RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES: THE MILITARY ASPECT

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China's overall military-political approach to the United States

The Chinese approach to strategic relations with the USA first took on a coherent form probably in 2020 and early 2021, although it has not been made public in its entirety. Unlike the USA, China has not and probably will not publish comprehensive policy documents concerning its plans for these relations.

During the administration of Donald Trump, leading US officials, primarily Vice President Michael Pence and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, presented their own detailed vision of a new era of rivalry with China. The Cabinet of President Joe Biden, that replaced it, largely shares this approach. At the time of this writing, the USA was preparing its *Strategic Competition Act 2021* that sets out every point of US-Chinese relations, from trade policy and military-political issues to ideology and competition in the Arctic.²

China is more terser in its foreign policy rhetoric. Nevertheless, the altered nature of relations with the USA is reflected in the individual foreign policy sections of the CPC Congress documents and reports of the Premier of the State Council of the PRC to the Sessions of the NPC.

Beijing's overall strategy towards relations with Washington has changed radically several times before. When China was closely allied to the Soviet Union in the 1950s, the two considered the USA

¹ This work was supported by a grant of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs of the National Research University Higher School of Economics in 2021.

² Strategic Competition Act of 2021, A Bill to Address issues involving the People's Republic of China, DAV21598 9VG, 117th Congress, 1st session, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2021 <<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DAV21598%20-%20Strategic%20Competition%20Act%20of%202021.pdf>>.

an unmitigated enemy, but the situation changed completely after the Soviet-China split in the late 1960s that led to armed clashes at the border. At that point, Beijing pursued close strategic cooperation with the USA, seeking to create a united front against the Soviet Union, which it now saw as the main threat to its security.

This course began changing in the early 1980s, with Beijing taking a more cautious approach within its “independent foreign policy” doctrine. However, before Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, Beijing had largely followed Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of “keeping a low profile and biding your time” (*tao guang yang hui*) – that is, of gathering strength and being careful not to draw attention to its activities.³ In essence, this meant that to secure a place among the world’s powers, that was worthy of its great history, China needed economic assistance of technologically developed Western states, and this required their political support or, at least, friendly neutrality. Therefore, China tried gathering strength while being careful not to irritate the outside world with excessive foreign policy activity.

At the same time, the goal of turning China into a great power under the Communist Party of China (the CPC) rule has never changed. Moreover, the CPC has based the legitimacy of its rule on the claim of being able to achieve this goal despite the fact that several previous generations of Chinese reformers and revolutionaries had failed. Although Chinese leaders never said exactly how long China would attempt to gather strength, it was clear that Deng Xiaoping had undertaken it seriously, and for the long haul.

China’s power grew under Deng’s successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, so that discussions arose among the ruling elite as to whether the time had come to enact a more active foreign policy. Chinese journalists and military experts published articles thereby calling for a more resolute protection of national interests and, above all, countering what Beijing perceived as US attempts to curb China’s growth by

³陈文良 [Chen, W.] ‘对“韬光养晦”的哲学审视’ [A Detailed Philosophical Analysis of the “taiguangyanghui” concept], 中国发展 [*China’s Development*], vol. 12, no. 1 (Feb. 2012), pp. 81–83.

encircling it with a network of alliances.⁴ However, at that time fearing the reaction of the West and possible consequences to economic growth, the country's leadership did not include most of these proposals in its official doctrine, but declared them an unofficial part of an open discussion. All of China's official foreign policy concepts during that period ("peaceful rise," "peaceful development," and "harmonious world") were aimed at convincing the outside world that China's rise posed no threat.

Xi Jinping's leadership changed this approach. The ideas that the principle of *tao guang yang hui* was obsolete, that it was time for China to take a more active approach, create military bases abroad, defend its core interests with military force, punish countries pursuing hostile policies with sanctions, etc. became part of official documents.⁵ Under Xi Jinping, China launched such large-scale international programs as *The Belt and Road Initiative (One Belt, One Road)*, *Made in China 2025* and others aimed at achieving technological independence and a major role in the world economy and politics for China.⁶

In terms of strategy, Beijing significantly expanded what it considers its "core interests" – interests that it is ready to protect with all its might and means. Whereas previously, it primarily referred to the issue of sovereignty over Taiwan, that concept now includes

⁴ 宋晓军 [Song, X.], 王小东 [Wang, X.], 黄纪苏 [Huang J.], 宋强 [Song, Q.], 刘仰 [Liu Y.], 中国不高兴: 大时代、大目标及我们的内忧外患 [China Is Displeased. The Great Epoch, Great Goals, and Our Domestic and External Difficulties] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2009), pp. 80–108; 刘明福 [Liu, M.], 后美国时代的大国思维: 中国梦 [Great-Power Mentality in the Post-American World: The Chinese Dream] (Beijing, Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 2010; 戴旭 [Dai, X.], *C* 型包围—内忧外患下的中国突围 [C-Shape Encirclement: How China Can Break Encirclement Under Domestic Difficulties and External Pressure] (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 2010), pp. 3–4.

⁵ Denisov, I. E. 'The Evolution of China's Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping', *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn'*, 2015, no. 5, pp. 40–54 [in Russian]; Kashin, V. B., Pyatachkova A. S., Krashennnikova L. S. 'China's Policy in Using Economic Sanctions: Theory and Practice', *Sravnitel'naya politika*, 2020, vol. 11. no. 2, pp. 123–138 [in Russian].

⁶ A. V. Lukin (ed.), *China's Global Project for Eurasia: A Problem Statement*, (Moscow: Nauchnyy ekspert, 2016) [in Russian].

the issues of Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, all territorial disputes with India and Japan and in the South China Sea, and even China's as-yet-not-clearly defined "development interests."

In making these changes, Beijing had not foreseen that the USA would react as sharply as it did. It assumed that the world was so globalized and the Chinese economy had become so interwoven with the world economy that serious decoupling and conflicts will not arise. Beijing expected that relations with Washington would develop in accordance with "a new type of relationship between major countries in the 21st century" that Xi Jinping proposed during his visit to the USA in 2012,⁷ the main idea of which was that the countries would coordinate their actions in the international arena while pursuing their own interests. The USA, however, did not accept this model. Washington perceived it as a threat to its leading position in the world and switched to a policy of actively containing China.

Although President Barack Obama began implementing the course of containment towards the end of his term, President Donald Trump pursued it far more actively. This development caught China completely by surprise, prompting sharp polemics and open disagreements in Chinese society.⁸

At the early stage of the exacerbation of the US–China relationship in 2018–2019, a number of Chinese observers suggested that individual politicians and their activities were the cause of the crisis in US–China relations and that it was possible to overcome the disagreements. On top of that, many were inclined to blame Xi Jinping personally for the rupture, pointing to his aggressive and overly ambitious foreign policy as well as the braggadocio of his senior officials.

During this period, China's political and intellectual elite engaged in a sharp debate that sometimes spilled over into public view. For example, in August 2018, the world learned of a collective letter from a group of Chinese academics and public figures calling

⁷ Lampton, D. M., 'A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for US–China Ties', *Asia Policy*, 2013, no. 16, pp. 51–68.

⁸ Lukin, A., 'The US–China Trade War and China's Strategic Future', *Survival*, 2019, vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 23–50.

for the dismissal of Hu Angang, director of the Center for China Study at Tsinghua University. He was accused of “triumphalism” for having claimed that China was close to surpassing the USA and becoming a leading world power.⁹

Similarly, Deng Pufang, the eldest son of the late architect of the Chinese reforms, Deng Xiaoping, and for many years the head of the Chinese Federation of Disabled People, said in a speech that China should not overdo claims of international leadership and that Beijing should “know its place” and make a sober assessment of the real state of affairs.¹⁰

During that period, Chinese officials commented cautiously on the state of relations with the USA, emphasizing their continuing interest in dialogue.

By 2020, the Chinese expert community was in strong agreement that the confrontation with the USA was, in fact, systemic and that Washington would inevitably attempt to contain China's technological development and limit its foreign economic relations. By that time, the Chinese expert community had based its judgment upon the fact that the continuation of the confrontation with the USA was inevitable, regardless of future political changes there.

The US course of technological containment of the PRC was considered to be the only alternative. Beijing assumed that any US administration would try to block Chinese 5G telecommunications equipment and AI products from the world market. As an optimistic scenario, there was a possibility that the new US administration

⁹ Huang, C., ‘China’s social media users call for sacking of ‘triumphalist’ academic, as anti-hype movement grows’, *South China Morning Post*, 3 Aug. 2018 <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2158054/chinas-social-media-users-call-sacking-triumphalist>>.

¹⁰ Mai, J., ‘Deng Xiaoping’s son urges China to “know its place” and not be “overbearing”’, *South China Morning Post*, 30 Oct. 2018 <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2170762/deng-xiaopings-son-uses-unpublicised-speech-urge-china-know-its>>.

would resume cooperation in certain areas of mutual interest within the bilateral relationship and then lift the most senseless and ineffective of the tariff restrictions imposed by the Trump administration.¹¹

Under no circumstances did Beijing expect the United States to abandon its policy of the military deterrence of China. In 2020, on the eve of Joe Biden's election, Beijing expressed the view that, although such a policy would continue, it would probably become more orderly and "cautious". It presumed that the new US administration would try to establish military contacts and put in place procedures that would prevent dangerous incidents from occurring. At the same time, as Deputy Director of China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Li Yan, noted Washington would continue its military and technical rivalry with China, attempts to achieve a decisive superiority over the country, and deployment of additional troops to the Asia-Pacific region.¹²

These expectations were generally born out in the months since Joe Biden took office. The US military activity in the Western Pacific has continued with little change from the final years of the Trump administration, including the carrying out of major military exercises in areas of the South China Sea that are sensitive for Beijing.¹³

Beijing ultimately decided to prepare for the worst while clearly hoping that D. Trump's policy was an aberration of sorts and that everything would return to normal after his departure. This was seen in China's heightened expectations of the meeting with the Biden administration representatives in Anchorage in March 2021. However, instead of offers of mutual compromise they had expected to receive there, the Chinese delegation faced with an angry rebuke on all

¹¹ 李湛 [Li, Zh.], '谁主沉浮? 美国大选政治观察,' [Who Rules over Man's Destiny? A Political Outlook of the US Elections], 财新网 [Caixin Net], 25 Aug. 2020 <<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1675988966161752896>>.

¹² 李岩 [Li, Y.], 拜登的对华军事政策重在“谨慎遏制” [Biden's Policy towards China is Still Based on 'Cautious Containment'], 中美聚焦王 [Sino-US Focus Net], 30 Dec. 2020 <<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1687467596148077131>>.

¹³ Lindberg, K. S., 'U.S. Aircraft Carriers Conduct Exercises in South China Sea', *Bloomberg*, 9 Feb. 2021 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-09/u-s-aircraft-carriers-conduct-exercises-in-south-china-sea>>.

the issues that Beijing considers its “core interests”. This experience will probably prompt China to adopt a more or less consistent strategy towards the USA.

China's military strategy towards the USA

China developed its military strategy towards the USA in keeping with its overall approach to that country. Beijing has viewed Washington as the most likely source of a military threat, apparently since sometime between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s. Two political factors during that period prompted changes to China's military planning. They included the normalization of relations with the Soviet Union (with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to the PRC in May 1989 cementing that shift), as well as the sharp chilling of the China-US relations in connection with the events on Tiananmen Square in the same year.

Operation Desert Storm, in which the US and allied troops suffered only minimal losses while quickly defeating the army of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in August 1990 – January 1991, made a strong impression on the Chinese leadership and prompted it to rethink the nature of modern warfare. At that time, the Iraqi army was significantly superior to the People's Liberation Army (the PLA) in terms of both technical equipment and combat experience, yet it was unable to mount effective resistance to the US offensive.

China only partially reveals changes to its military planning in various passages from its doctrinal documents, none of which is ever published in full. The most important of these is the “Military Strategic Guidelines” (*Junshi zhanlue fangzhen*) issued by the Central Military Commission of the CPC.

These documents consist of three components: identification of China's main strategic opponents; determination of the objectives of military operations based on the existing threats; and listing of the main strategies. These are followed by a section designated as “Fundamentals of Preparation for Military Operations” that describes the nature of future

military operations. Finally, the section “Basic Guiding Considerations” provides instructions and recommendations for conducting future PLA military operations.¹⁴

The “Guidelines” are secret documents, although the media makes an announcement each time the Central Military Commission formally adopts a document. Such act signals that the PRC military and political leaders are to reassess the nature of the military threats the country is facing. Only heavily redacted and formulaic fragments are released. The most important “Guidelines” that have subsequently led to fundamental changes in the Chinese military development were issued in 1993. They called for the PLA to prepare for “local warfare with the use of high technologies”. It was obvious that it could only refer to the developed countries of the West as a potential adversary, and primarily to the USA.

The explanations and clarifications published later clearly showed that the PLA had to prepare for military operations against the armed forces of developed states that had modern, precision-guided weapons, intelligence, and command and control systems, the potential to wage war in the information space and other capabilities that only the USA had at that time.

According to the information available, the subsequent “Guidelines” issued in 2004 and 2015 probably only refined the provisions contained in the 1993 document. They shifted the focus from “high technologies” to “information technologies.” It being understood that the document of 2004 referred to preparing for “local warfare with the use of information technologies,” while in 2015 it spoke of “informationized local warfare.” Of course, this also referred to the USA and its allies.

Individual fragments of the “Guidelines” appear in the China Defense *White Paper* that Beijing has published every two years on average since 1998. Nevertheless, the *White Papers* serve primarily as propaganda that bypasses the most sensitive aspects of military

¹⁴ Fravel, M. T., ‘China’s New Military Strategy: “Winning Informationized Local Wars”’, *China Brief*, vol. 15, no. 13, 2 July 2015 <<https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-new-military-strategy-winning-informationized-local-wars/>>.

planning, including the issue of possible opponents who, according to the data available, the “Guidelines” of the Central Military Commission should indicate directly.

Not only do the PRC documents make it obvious that China’s military development is oriented towards deterring another superpower with mighty armed forces and advanced technological capabilities (i. e., the United States), but some Chinese military-industrial programs and the course of the military reform itself also indicate a radical shift in military planning that began in the late 1980s.

In terms of China’s military development, these include a shift in focus from ground to naval forces, as well as a significant amount of investment since the late 1980s in the development of land- and sea-based intercontinental ballistic missiles intended primarily for the military deterrence of the United States. China has carried out these reforms since the late 1990s, as its military spending has started growing rapidly. The Chinese military budget grew an average of 15.9% annually in 1998–2007.¹⁵ That spending growth rate subsequently declined, varying from 6% to 10% per year from 2015 onward.¹⁶

China’s military buildup and its strategy towards the USA

When Beijing reoriented towards the USA and its allies as the most likely adversary, it led to a radical change in China’s army. Although Beijing officially declares that it is not participating in the arms race, its military buildup clearly indicates the desire to withstand the USA and its allies in a defensive war which may be waged both on the Chinese territory and in the surrounding seas.

¹⁵ Chen, S., Feffer, J, ‘China’s Military Spending: Soft Rise or Hard Threat?’, *Asian Perspective*, 2009, vol. 33, no. 4 (Special issue on Arms Race in Northeast Asia), pp. 47–67.

¹⁶ Xinhua, ‘China’s Defense Budget Maintains Single-Digit Growth for Six Consecutive Years’, 5 Mar. 2021 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/05/c_139785529.htm>.

The past 30 years of China's military buildup have changed the potential of the Chinese military and military-industrial complexes, as well as the very appearance of the Chinese armed forces. The People's Liberation Army no longer focuses primarily on its land forces that, after numerous waves of reductions, now represent less than one half of all its troops.

The greatest growth has occurred in the PLA Navy that now has the world's largest fleet by the number of warships and the second largest in terms of the main classes of warships – destroyers, frigates, and aircraft carriers.

China has already transformed itself from a hopeless outsider in the field of defense and military technologies into the second military power in the world – with the exception of strategic weapons, in which Russia holds a solid second place.

China is considered to be the main rival of the USA in the field of military technologies.¹⁷ Despite the fact that China still lags behind Russia in such types of military equipment as nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, air defense systems, and aircraft engines, Washington views China as its most dangerous rival in a number of cutting-edge fields of the development of dual-use technologies, including artificial intelligence and quantum technologies.

In military and economic terms, the USA retains significant superiority over the PRC in nominal military budget: with that of the USA totaling \$705 billion and that of China amounting to 1.36 trillion yuan, or \$202 billion at 2021 exchange rates.

However, this superiority loses some significance due to certain economic, military and political factors. First, when recalculated based on purchasing power parity, the Chinese budget increases by more than 150%, to \$320.8 billion.

¹⁷ Xiangning, W., 'Technology, power, and uncontrolled great power strategic competition between China and the United States', *China International Strategy Review*, 2020, vol. 2, pp. 99–119.

It is also important that the two countries structure their budgets differently. Whereas military equipment accounts for only a little more than 20% of the US military budget, and R&D – for another 14–15%,¹⁸ R&D and procurement have represented more than 40% of the Chinese military budget since 2015.¹⁹

At the same time, it is known that China does not include the vast majority of its expenditure on developing weapons and military equipment in its official military budget. Instead, these costs appear in the budget of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and a number of other government bodies. A SIPRI estimate of the hidden Chinese military R&D costs²⁰ suggests that they account for much more than 50% of China's military expenditures.

On closer examination, the US superiority is not so great. Converting the Chinese military budget into dollars while taking into account purchasing power parity and using the IMF's official exchange rate of 4.223 yuan per dollar in 2021, increases it one and a half times to more than 150% to \$320.8 billion.

Thus, US military spending on weapons and R&D is less than twice that of China. What's more, the two countries invest comparable sums in the development of their armed forces, and the spending gap between them is narrowing as the Chinese economy and military budget continue to grow at a more rapid pace. At the same time, China is experiencing much less military stress than the USA. Even taking

¹⁸ Harrison, T., and Daniels, S. P., *Analysis of the FY2021 Defense Budget*, Report of the CSIS Defense Budget Analysis Program, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Aug. 2020) <<http://defense360.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Analysis-of-the-FY-2021-Defense-Budget.pdf>>.

¹⁹ Xinhua, 'Full Text: China's National Defense in the New Era', 24 July 2019 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm>.

²⁰ Tian, N., Su, F., 'A New Estimate of China's Military Expenditure', SIPRI, Jan. 2021 <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/202101/2101_sipri_report_a_new_estimate_of_chinas_military_expenditure.pdf>.

into account the likely hidden military expenditures, military spending in China represents only 1.9% of GDP as compared to 3.4% of GDP in the USA.²¹

Another important factor affecting the future of the military competition is the deindustrialization of the USA in a number of industries while China maintains strong civilian industrial potential. This concerns primarily the civil shipbuilding industry, in which the USA holds an insignificant share of the world production (the industry is considered to have practically disappeared),²² while China's share is approximately 50%.²³ Given the predominantly naval nature of their military rivalry, the fact that one party has a powerful shipbuilding becomes an important advantage because it lowers the cost of implementing naval programs and provides huge reserves of production capacity. Such close relationship between commercial sea power and naval power is an important principle of maritime strategy.²⁴

As a result, the PLA Navy already equaled the US Navy in size in 2012–2014, and since 2015–2017, it has increased to double its size in terms of tonnage of combat ships commissioned annually.²⁵ The data on the number of combat aircraft produced are more fragmentary, but also suggest that the PLA Air Force has purchased a comparable or larger number of modern combat aircraft than the US Air Force.

At the same time, an important factor affecting the balance of military forces between the PRC and the USA is the distribution of US forces around the world. The USA has approximately 200,000 troops

²¹ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, SIPRI, <<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>>.

²² Mall, S., 'Freight Waves Classics: America's Commercial Shipbuilding Industry is Nearly Gone', Freight Waves, 22 Jan. 2021 <<https://www.freightwaves.com/news/freightwaves-classics-americas-commercial-shipbuilding-industry-is-nearly-gone>>.

²³ 'China's Shipbuilding Industry Keeps World-Leading Role', Hellenicshippingnews, 19 Jan. 2021 <<https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/chinas-shipbuilding-industry-keeps-world-leading-role/>>.

²⁴ Mahan, A. T., *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, 5th ed. (1890; repr. Boston: Little, Brown, 1894), p. 45.

²⁵ Lague, D., Lim, B. K. 'China's Vast Fleet is Tipping The Balance in The Pacific', Reuters, 30 Apr. 2019 <<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-army-navy/>>.

stationed abroad, of which only a minority are in the Western Pacific. In addition, a significant number of US troops are involved in operations abroad on a rotational basis, deterring or exerting pressure on countries such as Russia and Iran.

China does not have a well-developed system of bases abroad. So far, it has only one permanent foreign military facility in Djibouti, where up to 2,000 personnel serve. In the event of a conflict in the Pacific Ocean, China will be able to use all or almost all of its forces, while the USA will have to pull them from around the world.

One part of the Chinese strategy for protecting its “core interests” from the USA and its allies is the attempt to consolidate its superiority in the surrounding seas in which there are territorial disputes. So, after several heated arguments with Japan and the collision in 2010 of a Chinese fishing trawler with a Japanese Coast Guard vessel in the disputed Senkaku Archipelago (Diaoyu) in the East China Sea, China announced in 2013 the introduction of its air defense identification zone there, approximately one half of which intersects with the Japanese and a small part – with the South Korean and Taiwanese ones.²⁶

China is working even more openly to counteract the USA by building up its military on the islands and reefs it has occupied in the South China Sea with the goal being to ensure control over a huge maritime territory to which Beijing, according to its statement, claims “historical rights.” This involves measures on an unprecedented scale to construct artificial islands on the reefs that China has occupied and on which it subsequently builds military infrastructure such as docks, lighthouses, and airfields.²⁷ The USA and its allies do not recognize Chinese claims to control these areas of the South China Sea and periodically send warships there to demonstrate their opposition. A number of experts believe that in the medium or long term, Beijing is likely to introduce an air defense identification zone in this region as well, although it is not ready to take this step now due to the vulnerability

²⁶ Hayashi, N., and Kurashige, N., ‘China Overturned Draft Air Defense Zone, Expanded It Toward Japan’, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 12 Jan. 2014 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20140216065721/http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201401120021>>.

²⁷ Dikarev, A., and Lukin, A., ‘Russia’s Approach to South China Sea Territorial Dispute: It’s Only Business, Nothing Personal’, *The Pacific Review*, 2021.

of its military facilities and lack of infrastructure.²⁸ Some also argue that Chinese strategists might be drawing on the Soviet experience to counter the US fleet.²⁹

Overall, the PRC is now engaged in an extremely rapid buildup of its military potential in relation to the US armed forces. The year 2035 will probably be a milestone because, according to the program documents currently available, that is when the Chinese armed forces will have achieved complete technical modernization. The army plans to reach an intermediate stage in the increase of its combat capabilities by 2027, the centenary of the founding of the PLA.³⁰

The high level of the US public debt, that prevents a sharp increase in military spending, coupled with the steady growth of the Chinese economy in relation to that of the USA, suggests that by 2035, China may achieve overwhelming superiority over the USA and its allies in the Western Pacific in terms of conventional weapons.

At the same time, the Chinese nuclear arsenal may reach such a size by that time that the threat of an armed conflict escalating into a nuclear exchange would become unacceptable for the USA.

Thus, if events develop favorably for China, a situation may arise by 2035 in which the USA will no longer be able to guarantee the security of its allies in East Asia. This, in turn, will force those countries to seek a compromise with Beijing on favorable terms for the Chinese.

Achieving such an outcome without engaging in a direct military clash with the USA is probably the true goal of China's current military development. Until it accomplishes this goal, the PRC is unlikely to

²⁸ Storey, I., 'As US–China Tensions Rise, What Is The Outlook On The South China Sea Dispute In 2020–21?', *South China Morning Post*, 8 Sep. 2020 <<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3100563/us-china-tensions-rise-what-outlook-south-china-sea-dispute-2020>>.

²⁹ Goldstein, L. J., 'Russia's Past Can Help Explain China's South China Sea Strategy', *The National Interest*, 16 Jan. 2020 <<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russias-past-can-help-explain-chinas-south-china-sea-strategy-114141>>.

³⁰ Hart, B., Glaser, B.S., and Funaiolo, M. P., 'China's 2027 Goal Marks the PLA's Centennial, Not an Expedited Military Modernization', *China Brief*, vol. 21, no. 6, 26 Mar. 2021 <<https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-2027-goal-marks-the-plas-centennial-not-an-expedited-military-modernization/>>.

want to participate actively in arms control negotiations or even to ensure effective measures for transparency – that could expose the true intentions of China's military buildup.

China's nuclear strategy and arms control negotiations

Beijing's position on the negotiations on the reduction of nuclear weapons and medium-range missiles provides a vivid illustration of this disinterest. Ever since it built its first nuclear weapons, China's position has been as follows: China pledges not to use nuclear weapons first, but it will not participate in Soviet/Russian–US talks on strategic weapons until these countries reduce their nuclear potential to a “relatively low level.” Until this happens, Beijing will not declare the number of its nuclear warheads or delivery vehicles. This is a convenient position to take because it allows China to build up its nuclear forces to a level of its choosing without divulging this information.

What's more, the US currently estimates that in the recent years China has entered a period of rapid build-up of its nuclear weapons and will have doubled or quadrupled the number of its deployed nuclear warheads by 2030.³¹ According to the existing estimates of the number of the Chinese nuclear weapons, for example the SIPRI estimate that China held 320 warheads in 2020, the PRC's arsenal could reach 1,200–1,300 warheads. This would put China on a par with Russia and the USA, each of which has 1,550 deployed warheads, in accordance with the New START treaty.

These circumstances gave Washington cause for concern, which coincided with the general rise in anti-Chinese elements in the US policy. The US Defense Department's document *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020* names China's development of the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) as a particular threat due to its ability to deliver both

³¹ Richard, C. A., 'Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence', US Naval Institute, Feb. 2021 <<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/february/forging-21st-century-strategic-deterrence>>.

conventional and nuclear strikes on ground or naval targets. It also singles out China's new ICBMs that can be equipped with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs). The document also notes, "The number of warheads on the PRC's land-based ICBMs capable of threatening the United States is expected to grow to roughly 200 in the next five years."³²

Speaking in October of the same year about the Chinese subcritical tests of nuclear weapons in Xinjiang and the substantial program of ballistic missile tests conducted in 2019–2020, US Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea noted that by not participating in talks for the last three decades, China was able to maintain complete freedom from any restrictions, with the result that it could create from 1,000 to 2,000 IRBMs and 13 different types of cruise missiles.³³

For these reasons, the Trump administration called on China to join possible US-Russian arms control agreements, especially in connection with the discussions over the fate of the New START treaty that expired in 2021. Chinese officials strongly rejected any such possibility, calling it blackmail by Washington aimed at preserving US nuclear superiority.³⁴ Moreover, Beijing actively criticizes the US position and supports Russian proposals. For example, Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry Fu Cong said in July 2020, that "hying up the China factor is nothing but a ploy to divert world attention, and to create a pretext, under which they

³² 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020', US Department of Defense, 2020, p. 55 <<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>>.

³³ 'Virtual Event: Behind the Great Wall of Secrecy: China's Nuclear Buildup', The Heritage Foundation, 13 Oct. 2020 <<https://www.heritage.org/arms-control/event/virtual-event-behind-the-great-wall-secrecy-chinas-nuclear-buildup>>.

³⁴ Dotson, J., 'Beijing Rejects Any Involvement in Nuclear Arms Limitation Talks', The Jamestown Foundation, 30 Oct. 2020 <<https://jamestown.org/program/beijing-rejects-any-involvement-in-nuclear-arms-limitation-talks/>>.

could walk away from the New START". He also called on the USA to agree to the Russian proposal to extend New START and, on that basis, reduce its enormous nuclear arsenal even further.³⁵

Speaking at the Aspen Security Forum in August 2020, China's Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai said that it was "not yet the time" for China to participate in arms control talks. He argued that "China has a very small amount of nuclear weapons. It's not at the same level. We are far behind the US and Russia... So they should take the lead in international nuclear disarmament".³⁶ Addressing the UN General Assembly on October 12, 2020, Chinese Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Geng Shuang reiterated the traditional Chinese arguments that Beijing maintains a nuclear force at the minimum required for self-defense and that China would never engage in a nuclear arms race with another country. He said, "Given the huge gap between the nuclear arsenals of China and those of the US and the Russian Federation, it is unfair, unreasonable and infeasible to expect China to join in any trilateral arms control negotiation... This is just a trick to shift the focus of the international community. The US intention is to find an excuse to shirk its own special and primary responsibility for nuclear disarmament and find a pretext for gaining a free hand and obtaining an absolute military advantage... China will never participate in such a negotiation and will never accept any coercion or blackmail".³⁷

³⁵ 'Department of Arms Control and Disarmament Holds Briefing for International Arms Control and Disarmament Issues', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 8 July 2020 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/jks_665232/jkxw_665234/t1795979.shtml>; Xinhua, 'Expecting China to Join U. S.-Russia Nuclear Arms Talks "Unrealistic": Official' 8 July 2020 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/08/c_139197923.htm>.

³⁶ Xinhua, 'It is Not Right Timing for China to Join U. S.-Russia Arms Control Talks: Chinese Ambassador', 11 Aug. 2020 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/11/c_139282059.htm>.

³⁷ Xinhua, 'Asking China to Participate In "Trilateral Arms Control Negotiation" Infeasible: Chinese Envoy', 13 Oct. 2020 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/13/c_139435411.htm>.

Thus, for several reasons, China is unlikely to participate in arms control negotiations in the coming decade. First, China will hardly agree to participate in the treaty if it concerns medium-range missiles and Beijing will refuse to divulge significant information of such missiles. This is because the PLA has made medium-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles – mostly conventional – a centerpiece of its military and technical policy since the 1980s, with the result that the PLA's Rocket Force has a significant arsenal of such missiles, according to maximum estimates – up to 2,000 of them, and the country's military industry has made significant progress in perfecting them.³⁸ In particular, in 2019, China became the first country to deploy a medium-range ballistic missile with a gliding hypersonic warhead.

The medium- and shorter-range missiles in the PLA arsenal are intended to compensate for shortcomings that China still has in its combat aviation and naval forces in relation to the USA. Having such an arsenal gives the PRC a huge advantage by enabling it to destroy most of the military infrastructure of a potential enemy in the Western Pacific in the early stage of a war. The overwhelming majority, probably more than 90%, of China's missiles of this type carry conventional warheads. At the same time, the same formations of the PLA Rocket Force (Chinese missile bases) have both nuclear and non-nuclear missiles, with the result that any negotiations aimed at establishing limits on the number of medium-range missiles will eventually have to turn into talks on the balance of conventional arms in the region as a whole. Moreover, from the Chinese point of view, such talks will have to include other countries in the region as well.

Of the countries and territories adjacent to the PRC, India, North and South Korea, Taiwan, and Pakistan currently have medium-range land-based missiles. Japan has officially announced that it is working on hypersonic missiles with a range of up to 500 km, but their

³⁸ 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018', US Department of Defense, 2018 <<https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>>.

actual characteristics are not known. In practice, there is little chance, however, that the multilateral arms reduction talks necessitated by this situation will take place.

Neither will China agree at present to limit nuclear weapons alone. China is unwilling to consider an agreement in which it must adhere to a lower cap on the number of warheads than the USA or Russia, since in this case it will be an unequal agreement. Negotiations can only proceed if, as the Chinese Foreign Ministry has said, the USA reduces its arsenal to the Chinese level – an unlikely event, the Ministry also noted.³⁹

The PRC has invested a great deal in developing its strategic nuclear forces over the past three decades. Although the exact figure is unknown, China is known to have carried out work simultaneously on three types of ICBMs, new submarines and missiles for them, as well as on a new type of strategic bomber. It also built a large number of expensive infrastructure facilities for these forces. According to known US estimates,⁴⁰ China has a good chance to, if not achieve parity, then to close the gap with the world's nuclear superpowers significantly. Thus, for China to conclude a nuclear agreement now would amount to a unilateral Chinese concession to the USA.

Based on satellite images, American experts announced in July 2021 that China is building at once two new silo fields to deploy ICBMs – near the city of Yumen in Gansu province (119 silos) and not far from the city of Hami in Eastern Xinjiang (presumably, 110 silos). According to researchers from the Federation of American Scientists, this suggests that a total of about 250 silos are currently being built in China, which exceeds the number of all Russian silo-based ICBMs and accounts for more than half of all US ICBMs. The construction program itself is the largest since the Cold War. “If they are all loaded with single-warhead missiles, then the number of warheads on Chinese ICBMs could potentially increase from about 185 warheads today to as

³⁹ RIA Novosti, ‘China Explained the Necessity of Increasing Military Capacity’, 8 July 2020 [in Russian].

⁴⁰ Richard, C. A., ‘Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence’, US Naval Institute, Feb. 2021 <<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/february/forging-21st-century-strategic-deterrence>>.

many as 415 warheads. If the new silos are loaded with the new MIRVed DF-41 ICBMs, then Chinese ICBMs could potentially carry more than 875 warheads (assuming 3 warheads per missile) when the Yumen and Hami missile silo fields are completed,” write the authors of this analysis.

Of course, the construction of silos, itself, does not mean that all of them will be loaded with ICBMs. The Chinese practice of deploying ICBM silo complexes is characterized by constructing a very large number of empty decoys at the same time with real launchers. About half of the PLA Rocket Force is military engineering units, and this is about 50–60 thousand people who are constantly busy building, firstly, underground facilities, and, secondly, all kinds of decoy targets used to conceal real weapons. China is enjoying its advantage as a country with the world’s most powerful construction complex, which produces a huge amount of building materials. The increase in the number of Chinese missile facilities is indeed proceeding at a rapid pace, but the construction of hundreds of silos for the actual deployment of ICBMs in one area is unlikely. There is high likelihood of most of these silos being decoys which will hide a much smaller number of real ballistic missiles. Such decoy silos are not to be loaded, but they will look the same as real ones from space. Nevertheless, the adoption of even 20 *Dong Feng-41* missiles into service will be a very serious step as in any case we are talking about many dozens, and maybe hundreds of additional Chinese nuclear warheads that will be able to reach US territory. In addition, nothing can prevent Beijing from making a political decision to load more silos.

Russia is located close to China, thus missiles of this range are not needed to defeat Russian targets, but are obviously intended for a guaranteed retaliatory strike against the United States. If so, it will mean a radical change in the Chinese nuclear doctrine. In addition, it should be borne in mind that in the event of a Sino-American conflict, ICBMs located in this region will pass over Russian territory, which should make Moscow think about it.

In any case, according to well-known American estimates, the PRC has real chances if not to reach parity, but to sharply reduce the gap with the nuclear superpowers. To conclude a nuclear agreement in such conditions would be a unilateral Chinese concession to the United States.

China will probably be ready to enter into negotiations once it reaches approximate parity with the superpowers, but even then, those talks will be greatly complicated by the asymmetry among the triad of leading players – Russia, China, and the USA. Any attempts to bring China into such talks prematurely are probably doomed to failure. The most that can be achieved is to include China as an observer in negotiations on strategic stability and predictability to build mutual trust. The Chinese authorities might agree to this as a way of obtaining information as well as clarifying their ideas about the forces and concepts of Russia and the USA.