

Weekly ICBM EAR Report



Image: Illustration of the Sentinel next-generation ICBM. Credit: Northrop Grumman - Space News

Prepared by Peter Huessy

Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies (NIDS)

President of GeoStrategic Analysis, Potomac, Maryland

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ICBM EAR Week of 28th December The New Year ICBM EAR

Summary

The top story is a review of how Scott Sagan gets wrong by 900% the capability of the Israeli and US missile defense---the facts show that in June 2025 missile defenses were from 87%-99% effective as opposed to the Sagan estimates of as low as 10%.

The regular quotes of the week are our first items. Then the New Year's first ICBM Ear includes some very high quality essays: Payne on testing; McGiffin on overall deterrence; Dodge on the value of ICBMs and Gertz on China.

Our first nuclear deterrent seminar for the year will be in January with Rick Fisher on China. Ms. Ellis from NDU writes about China's nuclear buildup; international nuclear developments are highlighted along with A1 and Nuclear NC3; Honrada from Asian Times has a perspective of China's NFU strategy and its actual deployments of nuclear arms; the Iran and Missile Defense Corners are updated; and Congress lays out issues re Golden Dome. Followed by an update on recruitment in the US military from Senator Jim Banks (R-Ind and an interesting arms control proposal from NEP's Henry Sokolski.

Quotes of the Week

Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA) "Iran can't ever develop a nuclear weapon. Fully supported the strike earlier this year. Fully support any future strikes to damage or destroy their nuclear ambitions.

President Trump: 'I don't know if you read or you saw, they have a big plant or a big facility where they send the – where the ships come from,' 'Two nights ago we knocked that out – so we hit them very hard.

New Dow Assessment: Taken together, China's silo surge, early-warning push and creeping LOW logic signal not just a bigger arsenal, but a far riskier nuclear posture—one that sharpens deterrence while quietly eroding the guardrails that once kept a great-power crisis from racing toward catastrophe.

NIPP's Michaela Dodge: The United States simply must maintain its strategic nuclear triad into the future. There is no substitute for ICBMs within that force, and reducing the ICBM leg of the nuclear triad will leave the United States and its allies less.

From the archives: President Ronald Reagan: "The U.S. willingness to reduce its arms sales to Taiwan is conditioned absolutely upon the continued commitment of China to the peaceful solution of the Taiwan-PRC differences. It should be clearly understood that the linkage between these two matters is a permanent imperative of U.S. foreign policy."

From the history archives: President George H. W. Bush ordered the invasion of Panama on December 20, 1989 to capture drug-running dictator Manuel Noriega who then surrendered thirty seven years ago on January 3, 1990. January 3, 2026 is the date for the arrest of Venezuelan drug cartel boss Nicholas Maduro.

ICBM Essay Highlights of the Week

Link to Essay: <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=h-6fmPRiOE0%3d>

NIPP's Michaela Dodge writes in the Joint Forces Quarterly of the National Defense University about the enduring value of the ICBM force and begins with this quote from Admiral (Ret) Richards:

"We have a triad . . . in part because of the flexibility it provides, the ability to hedge inside of it . . . [W]hat it also enables you to do is address the threat or the risks you didn't see coming. We always built margin into our strategic forces to make sure that we could account for the unknown risks that may be out there alongside the risk that we could reasonably see.

Dodge then concludes with this summary of the case for the TRIAD including the ICBM force:

More broadly, eliminating a leg of a nuclear triad now when adversaries are doubling down on modernization would send a signal that the United States is ceding the competition in this area to them. That would likely mean more aggression against U.S. and allied interests, more global instability, and consequently less economic prosperity.

As the United States is planning its force posture modernization, it must consider adversary forces and goals and what the President can threaten with U.S. nuclear forces to frustrate them. The decrease in the diversity and number of U.S. nuclear forces is a problem—and a difficult path lies ahead in trying to repair it.

It begins with the recapitalization of the U.S. nuclear enterprise, including the laboratories, so they can build new nuclear warheads and be more flexible and agile in the face of dangerous national security trends. Eight former commanders of U.S. Strategic Command wrote in 2017 that the “combined capabilities of the triad provide the [P]resident with the mixture of systems and weapons necessary to hold an adversary’s most valuable targets at risk, with the credibility of an assured response if needed—the essence of deterrence.”

More Excerpts from NIPP’s Michaela Dodge from the NDU’s Joint Forces Quarterly:

“An adversary would have to use many of its own warheads against U.S. ICBM fields, thus minimizing the relative damage to the rest of the country. The difference in casualties could be in the millions by some accounts.¹² A hypothetical nuclear exchange between Russia and the United States could result in 75 million casualties.¹³ Should the ICBM leg be eliminated, the number could rise to 125 million, according to some calculations. **ICBMs create an extremely high barrier to a first-strike attack, not only because of the other legs of the triad but also because ICBMs are designed to withstand such an attack and be available for retaliation, if needed.**”

“Despite some prominent calls for the elimination of the ICBM leg of the triad, **the system is more important than ever because of threat developments and decreases in the flexibility and diversity of the U.S. nuclear arsenal since the end of the Cold War.**¹ ICBMs continue to make a critical contribution to U.S. national security strategy—and will continue to do so for years to come.”

“An ICBM can be launched only “upon receipt of an authenticated, encrypted, and securely transmitted order from the President of the United States.”¹⁸ The risk of an accidental launch is minimal, and in any event, U.S. ICBMs are targeted on open ocean areas, not at other countries. **The usual proposed solution to this not-real problem is de-alerting—making them less than launch-ready. This would strip ICBMs of responsiveness, one of their most important attributes, which is why all administrations have rejected the idea. Moreover, because ICBMs are always on alert, there is no need for potentially destabilizing posture changes during times of heightened tensions.**

“Eight former commanders of U.S. Strategic Command wrote in 2017 that the “combined capabilities of the triad provide the [P]resident with the mixture of systems and weapons necessary to hold an adversary’s most valuable targets at risk, with the credibility of an assured response if needed—the essence of deterrence.”³⁷ The United States simply must maintain its strategic nuclear triad into the future. There is no substitute for ICBMs within that force, and reducing the ICBM leg of the nuclear triad will leave the United States and its allies less safe.”

The Case for Deterrence: What the 2025 NSS Gets Right

<https://globalsecurityreview.com/the-case-for-deterrence-what-the-2025-nss-gets-right/>

By: Col. Curtis McGiffin (U.S. Air Force, Ret.) for Global Security // 03JAN2025

After ten months in office, the Trump administration has released its 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), marking a clear shift toward an “America First” approach that emphasizes core U.S. national interests, economic strength, and strategic restraint overseas. At its core is a familiar axiom: peace rests on strength.

The national security strategy outlines the president’s strategic vision and serves as the closest approximation to a U.S. grand strategy. It orients the POTUS’ goals and associated efforts in foreign and defense policy within the executive branch and informs Congress of the POTUS’ priorities and direction. The NSS declares what is important to America—its national interests, goals, and priorities—and emphasizes how the President envisions the use of America’s diplomatic, informational, economic, military, and [technological instruments of power](#) to achieve or service those interests. The 2025 National Security Strategy is not the most comprehensive ever produced; that distinction belongs to the President’s first [NSS in 2017](#).

The 2025 NSS identifies three core national interests that collectively shape U.S. strategy.

- **First, it is the “balance of power,” which focuses on U.S. security and emphasizes preventing any rival from gaining regional or global dominance that could threaten U.S. sovereignty or freedom of action.**
- **Second, a predisposition to non-interventionism, which reflects a desire to limit U.S. involvement in long-lasting or discretionary foreign wars, emphasizing restraint, burden-sharing, and deterrence over “fruitless ‘nation-building’ wars.”**
- **Third, economic security, a key strategic goal, which requires the United States to maintain its position as the world’s leading economy through balanced trade, secure access to essential resources, reindustrialization, energy security, and mutually beneficial economic ties with other countries.**

Collectively, these interests reveal a strategy that prioritizes American strength and strategic stability over “forever wars,” while recognizing that economic vitality and security are inseparable from national power. Only a strong nuclear deterrent will ensure these core national interests are both protected and advanced. The core idea of 2025 NSS is “peace through strength,” asserting credible military power and the fear it projects as the best safeguard against conflict amid geopolitical turbulence and great-power competition. This NSS espouses a more realist disposition, unapologetically relying on deterrence to project strength in a world fraught with nuclear weapon expansion.

President Reagan reminded us in 1986 that “Nations do not mistrust each other because they are armed; they are armed because they mistrust each other.” **The 2025 NSS clearly states on page three, “We want the world’s most robust, credible, and modern nuclear deterrent.” This is the engine of a U.S. balance of power policy—acting to prevent other states or coalitions of states from achieving dominant power over the U.S., thereby maintaining a balance between stability and security. Moreover, the NSS emphasizes that deterrence depends on maintaining U.S. military “overmatch.”**

An abundant, modern, and resilient nuclear arsenal not only provides the military advantage sought but also does so at a lower cost than a conventionally armed force with equivalent destructive capability. Next, instead of open-ended overseas wars or nation-building, the 2025 NSS frames military engagement as justified only when U.S. core interests are directly threatened. This predisposition to non-interventionism requires maximum deterrence strategies to prevent regional conflicts from escalating into large-scale wars that could “come to our shores, [which] is bad for American interests.”

Moreover, empowering and enabling allies and partners—removing imperial perceptions of American behavior—by letting them lead, investing in their capabilities, **and treating them as co-architects rather than subcontractors signals that America is not trying to dominate outcomes but to share responsibility. This creates economic value through burden sharing and arms sales,** while fostering an equally shared commitment to security goals and deterrence. Capacity building is not short-sighted; it is a long-term investment in partnerships that advance the balance of power without relying solely on American taxpayers.

The 2025 NSS further stresses that economic security and vitality—one of President Trump’s central goals—requires a sustained focus on deterrence to prevent war in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. By creating the strategic space for economic expansion, successful deterrence enables reinvestment in the very capabilities that preserve it. This dynamic not only offers a long-term sustainment pathway for America’s nuclear deterrent force but also reinforces deterrence as the essential buffer between competition and conflict. Finally, the NSS contends that durable deterrence rests as much on economic and technological dominance as on military power.

By preserving America’s lead in high-tech innovation, increasing its industrial capacity, ensuring energy dominance, and securing reliable access to critical minerals, the United States reduces adversaries’ incentives to challenge it militarily while incentivizing a realignment of countries toward U.S. interests. At the same time, the strategy underscores that economic strength alone is insufficient; it must be coupled with a military that is rigorously recruited, trained, equipped, and modernized to remain the world’s most lethal and technologically advanced deterrent force, protecting U.S. interests and preventing conflict. The 2025 NSS is far from “business as usual.”

It embraces sovereignty, fairness, and balance of power, asserting that peace rests on strength—not wishful thinking, unchecked interventionism, or self-imposed restraint. **The strategy states that “in the long term, maintaining American economic and technological preeminence is the surest way to deter and prevent a large-scale military conflict,”** thereby framing deterrence not simply as a matter of nuclear or conventional force posture, but as the cumulative product of industrial capacity, innovation, and sustained national investment. Within this

logic lies a clear call to expand and emplace a robust, modern, flexible, and resilient nuclear arsenal capable of deterring nuclear attack, averting major war, and safeguarding America's national interests.

Col. Curtis McGiffin (U.S. Air Force, Ret.) is Vice President for Education at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies and visiting professor at Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies. Views expressed in this article are his own.

Guest Essay

Guest Essay #3 from Dr. Keith Payne: Nuclear Testing and NIPP INFORMATION SERIES Issue No. 647 | January 5, 2026

Conclusion

We cannot wait until future crises are upon us to consider the types of deterrence capabilities most likely to be needed to preserve peace, and whether their development does or does not, indicate the need for some form of explosive testing. Of course, this is a speculative exercise. All considerations of deterrence looking forward are inherently speculative regarding whom we will need to deter and how; that is the nature of this most serious subject. Nevertheless, such analysis is necessary if we are to prioritize the continuing deterrence of war over arms control ideology and/or incomplete answers.

Editor's Note: This is the key issue: For example, is some form of ultralow-yield explosive testing, such as hydronuclear testing, needed or helpful for new, ultralow-yield warheads **which may be key to extending nuclear deterrence to allies, or for specialized warheads capable of holding at risk highly-protected bunkers?** The late Johnny Foster, long the most renowned U.S. nuclear weapons expert, consistently said very low-yield, explosive testing would be particularly helpful for the former.



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Upcoming Events

2026 NIDS/Huessy Nuclear Deterrent Seminar Series

On January 12, 2026, Dr. Rick Fisher of the International Strategy and Assessment Center will detail the current CCP nuclear weapons strategy: The CCP's objective is global hegemony, global military superiority, for which nuclear superiority would be the most important component. A successful nuclear coercion of the US would ipso facto require superiority, such as combined PLA-Russia coercive ops, again the ability to convey significant overmatch. The PLA has theater nuclear superiority & now compounded by North Korea's nuclear dyad. The CCP seeks superiority in almost all other spheres, and the United States must get used to China seeking nuclear superiority.

Guest Essay

Guest Essay from NIPP by Kathleen Ellis from National Defense University (NDU).

When Xi became head of the CCP in 2012, he laid out a nationalist vision, "the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," to guide domestic and foreign policy under his leadership. According to Xi, national rejuvenation represents the rise of the Chinese nation and Chinese civilization, led by the CCP, out of the "darkness" of the "semi-colonial, semi-feudal society" to which China had been reduced by foreign powers between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. **Xi aims for China to achieve this national rejuvenation—attaining global superpower status—by 2049, the one-hundredth anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Hence, his hallmark "Chinese Dream" slogan suggests a China that will, by 2049, have recovered the historical territories lost to foreign powers during its "Century of Humiliation."**

Furthermore, because the United States relies only on strategic deterrence to dissuade nuclear threats against the U.S. homeland, and because the current national missile defense system is ineffective against China, **China's nuclear buildup increases the likelihood that China will attempt to deter the United States from intervening in the Pacific by holding the U.S. homeland hostage.** Such threats could not only deter the United States from helping Taiwan against a potential Chinese invasion but **also divide the United States from its East Asian allies by challenging the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments—and if U.S. credibility does indeed weaken, China will be in a strong position to contest U.S. primacy in the Indo-Pacific and globally.**



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US & Israel Missile Defense

US & Israel Missile Defense: 87%-99% Successful.

Scott Sagan off by 900%.

Israeli, Uzi Rubin and Scott Sagan: A missile defense update.

Scott Sagan asserts in a recent Bulletin of Atomic Scientist (BAS) essay that Israeli mid-course missile defense against Iranian long range rockets had only a 10% success rate. **Israeli's expert on missile defense, Dr. Uzi Rubin, tells me, Sagan's claim is not supported by the facts. "He explains: the Iranians fired about 550 missiles from Iran at Israel in June 2025. Only about 60 impacted within Israels territory [Sagan claims 45], so 60/550 is 10.9% and 45/550 is 8%, so that is the number of missiles that actually landed on Israel territory. And therefore 90%-92% did not impact which implies the successful ballistic missile intercept capability was considerably higher than 10% Sagan claimed was achieved by mid-course defense technology.**

If Israels missile defense would have had only a 10% success rate, there would have been nearly 500 impacts within Israel. But no such number of impacts were reported. With 60 missiles impacting and 32 fatalities, that is close to about one fatality per two impacting missiles, or 0.06 fatalities per one fired missile, an illustration of the enormous benefit of missile defenses.

What Sagan appears to have missed is that the 87% success rate [an estimate Sagan uses for some missile defense] was against the ballistic threats, achieved exclusively by the mid-course interceptors Arrow 2 and 3 as well as US mid-course missile defenses deployed to Israel.

The success rate against Iranian drones was more than 99%, achieved mostly by air to air interceptions (fighter aircraft and gunships) and by Iron Dome, which has drone interception capabilities.

Sagan apparently made the mistake of assuming the defense against the ballistic threats and the defense against the drones was performed by the same system(s). In essence, those were two distinct battles: First: combatting the ballistic threats with Arrow 2 and 3 with the support of THAAD and the US Navy SM3/Aegis resulting in an 87% interception success rate. Proof positive that a combined battlefield field capability in the real world worked spectacularly well. And Second: combating the drones by combat aircraft and gunships of the Israel Air Force, supported by the US Air Force and other friendly air forces in the region, and by Iron dome batteries, resulted in an incredible 99% success rate.

The underlying story here is continued negative assessment of the capability of the US and allied missile defenses, illustrated by the recent fiction movie "Dynamite" which Sagan reviewed in the BAS essay. Many within the nuclear abolition community have had a long standing distaste for US missile defenses especially the currently deployed midcourse defense but also missile defenses in general. As Editor Bill Keller of the New York Times once put it, the wrong-headed American desire for a strong missile defense system is a wish for an "unfettered US foreign policy"---where the bad guys can't defeat the US military or in this case, the Israelis.

Here is Sagan's original essay excerpt from which the missile defense critique appeared:

"In the June 2025 "12-day War" against Iran, the Israeli "Iron Dome" and other defenses had an impressive 87 percent success rate against the hundreds of drones and 200 ballistic missiles armed with conventional warheads, launched by Tehran against Israel. Israel's midcourse interceptors had a modest 10 percent success rate. And the 45 missiles that got through killed 28 Israelis (27 civilians and one soldier). [Editor's Note: If 45/200 got through, that implies a 78% success rate of interception. If 45/550 made it through, that implies a 92%

success rate.] A single Hiroshima-sized weapon detonated above Tel Aviv would kill 100,000 and injure 200,000. Had all

the Iranian missiles and drones been armed with nuclear warheads, most of Israel would have been destroyed. [Editor's Note: Which calls into question why the BAS in the same issue would publish an essay that calls for a prohibition on using military force against Iran's nuclear weapons capabilities.]

International Developments of Nuclear Note

China intensified military exercises around Taiwan on Tuesday, deploying bombers and warships and firing long-range artillery during a second day of drills designed to demonstrate Beijing's ability to blockade the island, according to the New York Times.

"China announces major military drills around Taiwan in 'serious warning' against any push for independence,"

Russia likely placing new hypersonic missiles at former airbase in Belarus, researchers find."

Iran on Sunday launched three domestically built satellites into low Earth orbit aboard a Russian Soyuz rocket, deepening space cooperation between Tehran and Moscow in a program Western governments say draws on technologies applicable to long-range missiles,"

China has been growing its stockpile of nuclear warheads by about 100 a year and remains on track to field 1,000 warheads by 2030, a Pentagon assessment found.

Beijing appears to be "seeking to shorten the time it would take to launch a nuclear counterattack, if China's nuclear forces came under fire."

There has been accelerated activity since about 2021 at Chinese sites involved in producing nuclear warhead components — changes that "could supercharge China's nuclear ambitions"

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un oversaw launches over the weekend of long-range strategic cruise missiles to test the reliability of the Pyongyang's nuclear deterrence, days earlier showed off apparent progress in the construction of the country's first nuclear-powered submarine.

"North Korea debuts new launcher for nuclear missiles aimed at South Korea,"

"China builds world-first crab-walking electric ICBM mobile launcher prototype."

Separately, the Russian Defense Ministry announced Tuesday that its nuclear-capable Oreshnik missile system has entered active service and been deployed in Belarus.

Deepfakes and AI

How Deepfakes Could Lead to Doomsday

America's Nuclear Warning Systems Aren't Ready for AI

[Erin D. Dumbacher](#)

December 29, 2025

The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence has exacerbated threats to nuclear stability. One fear is that a nuclear weapons state might delegate the decision to use nuclear weapons to machines. The United States, however, has introduced safeguards to ensure that humans continue to make the final call over whether to launch a strike. According to the 2022 National Defense Strategy, a human will remain "in the loop" for any decisions to use, or stop using, a nuclear weapon. And U.S. President [Joe Biden](#) and Chinese leader Xi Jinping agreed in twin statements that "there should be human control over the decision to use nuclear weapons."

Administration Developments of Nuclear Note

From Bill Gertz, The Washington Times: Naval analyst: PLA planned missile strikes on U.S. homeland revealed.

Andrew S. Erickson, a professor of strategy at the U.S. Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute, identified new Chinese missile threats to the American homeland revealed in the Pentagon's latest annual China military power report. "Arguably, one of the most significant revelations is that America's homeland is not a sanctuary from either nuclear or conventional missiles," Mr. Erickson stated on his website in analyzing the latest Pentagon study. "Per the report's Fielded Conventional Strike graphic, China has deployed a conventional [intercontinental ballistic missile] capable of partially ranging America's homeland."

The latest report revealed that the People's Liberation Army's DF-27 is a deployed missile system with ICBM range. The missile can be armed with several payloads, including conventional or nuclear warheads, an anti-ship warhead and hypersonic glide vehicle. "The report underscores that China has the world's leading hypersonic missile arsenal," Mr. Erickson stated. "It highlights land-attack and anti-ship missile families — including DF-17 and YJ-21 — as well as longer-range ballistic missile families (DF-21, DF-26, DF-27) whose reentry vehicles or glide payloads can maneuver at hypersonic speeds."

The Pentagon report concludes that the PLA expects to be ready to fight and win a war on Taiwan by 2027 with three plans for victory. One scenarios is called "strategic decisive victory" — prevailing in a war against Taiwan with U.S. intervention at acceptable cost. Nuclear and other strategic deterrent weapons also are being built up to offset American military advantages and "strategic deterrence and control" call for the PLA to manage escalation and dissuade opportunistic actions by others.

Defense contractor on Chinese sanctions

China announced it is imposing sanctions on several American defense companies and their leaders on Dec. 26 in response to the latest U.S. arms sales package to Taiwan worth an estimated \$11 billion. The 20 companies sanctioned by China include Northrop Grumman Systems Corp., L3Harris Maritime Services, Boeing and several U.S. drone manufacturers. Among the 10 senior U.S. executives sanctioned was Palmer Luckey, founder of Anduril Industries, who responded with holiday mirth. Mr. Luckey stated on social media on Dec. 26: "Late last night, I received a final Christmas gift: official notification from the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs that I, Palmer Luckey (Male), have been personally sanctioned as a dangerous actor.

"I want to thank my family, my team, and my Lord Jesus Christ for this award," he stated. "Anduril has been sanctioned for a while now, as have many of my peers, but it means so much to finally have my non-existent Chinese assets seized and repurposed." Mr. Luckey also said the sanctions "also prohibit all Chinese nationals from engaging with me in any way, which should really clear up my social media feeds."

China's Foreign Ministry said it took the action because the latest arms sale to Taiwan violated policies governing U.S.-China relations, including three historical joint communiques. However, one of those communiques issued in 1982 during the Regan administration includes an internal memo from President Reagan interpreting the communique's view of arms sales as directly linked to threats against Taiwan. "The U.S. willingness to reduce its arms sales to Taiwan is conditioned absolutely upon the continued commitment of China to the peaceful solution of the Taiwan-PRC differences," Reagan said. "It should be clearly understood that the linkage between these two matters is a permanent imperative of U.S. foreign policy."

PLA: War games practice for a Taiwan takeover

China's People's Liberation Army finished its latest round of saber-rattling military exercises near Taiwan on Wednesday, prompting statements of concern from Japan and Australia. However, the live-fire drills that included provocative rocket firings described in official statements as practice "decapitation" strikes drew silence from the Pentagon and the Indo-Pacific Command, despite major PLA threats to a key regional ally. PLA spokesman Senior Capt. Li Xi said Wednesday the exercises called Justice Mission 2025 were successfully completed. The PLA will continue to "resolutely thwart the attempts of Taiwan independence separatists and external intervention," he posted on X.

The drills involved record numbers of aircraft and large numbers of warships operating in seven zones encircling most of the island. Taiwan's military reported detecting 207 Chinese PLA aircraft during two days of the exercises. The previous exercise record was 178 aircraft. As many as 35 PLA navy warships took part, along with 29 coast guard vessels. Along with the activities, the PLA issued several unusually blunt statements that characterized the exercises as a threat to forcibly annex the democratic-ruled island. The exercises did not seek to close the island but instead framed it with military forces, the military posted on X.

“Joint patrols test the responsiveness of command networks, interdiction drills explore how ports and choke-points could be sealed under duress, and long-range precision platforms simulate strikes against mobile ground targets,” the PLA posted.

Reports describing the drills as “encirclement,” “strangulation” and “coercion” were dramatic, the PLA said. However, the exercises are not an act or a bluff — they are a signal,” its statement read. “Reunification, in China’s view, is not a question of ‘if,’ but of ‘how’ and ‘when.’”

Reunification is Beijing’s term for resolving its decades-long dispute with Taiwan, an independent state never ruled by the mainland and divided between native Taiwanese and Nationalist forces that fled to the island during a civil war with the communists in 1949. In Tokyo, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s administration said the drills increased regional tensions and prompted official government statements of concern to Beijing. The Japanese government said it expects the Taiwan dispute to be resolved peacefully through dialogue. “Peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are important for the international community as a whole,” the statement read. “We will continue to monitor related developments with strong interests.”

China has targeted Japan with a large-scale propaganda campaign after Ms. Takaichi told parliament that a Chinese attack on Taiwan would pose a “survival-threatening situation” for Japan. Australia’s government also voiced deep concerns to Beijing about the encirclement of Taiwan with PLA warships and the live firing of missiles and use of fighter jets for conducting simulated strikes. “Australia strongly opposes any actions that increase the risk of accident, miscalculation or escalation,” the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said Wednesday. The department said differences between China and Taiwan should be managed through dialogue and not the use of force or coercion.

“Australia opposes any unilateral action to change the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. Peace and stability are in all our interests,” the statement said, noting that Australian officials raised the government’s concerns with Chinese counterparts.

Taiwan Defense Minister Wellington Koo said Tuesday that the provocative PLA actions threatened regional stability and civilian air traffic. The Taiwanese military “will respond calmly and safeguard our nation’s security and democracy,” he said, according to local media reports. By contrast, the Pentagon and the Indo-Pacific Command declined to comment on the threatening war games.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in May during a meeting of defense officials in Singapore that “any attempt by Communist China to conquer Taiwan by force would result in devastating consequences for the Indo-Pacific and the world.” “There’s no reason to sugar-coat it,” he said. “The threat China poses is real and it could be imminent.” Since then, the Pentagon and the Indo-Pacific Command have scaled back rhetoric and comments on threats posed by China. The change in official tone comes as President Trump is seeking to conclude a trade deal with China and arrange reciprocal state visits with Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2026.

The PLA described the war games as practice for “identification, warning and expulsion, strikes on hostile vessels, fleet air defense, and anti-submarine warfare from air and in the waters to the north and south of Taiwan.” H-6 bombers conducted simulated precision attacks on targets in Taiwan, the military said. A warship task force led by an amphibious assault ship and joined by destroyers, frigates and drones conducted joint drills that included rapid landing operations and the seizure of key ports in the waters to the east of Taiwan, the PLA said. Long-range multiple rocket launchers fired 27 rockets into waters north and south of Taiwan. Ten landed in waters close to the island — ranges that analysts say were the closest live fire exercises to date.

China Analysis

More analysis on China

[China's new nuke posture puts US on notice and world on the brink - Asia Times](#)

China trading nuclear restraint for speed in new early-warning posture that will make future crises faster and far more dangerous

By: [Gabriel Honrada](#) for Asia Times // December 30, 2025

China’s rapid silo buildup, early-warning push and flirtation with launch-on-warning (LOW) mark a decisive shift from a minimalist deterrent to a hair-trigger nuclear posture that could redefine crisis stability from Taiwan to the continental US.

This month, the US Department of Defense released its annual [China Military Power Report \(CMPR\)](#), which states that China has likely loaded more than 100 solid-propellant DF-31-class intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) at three silo fields, [most likely across three newly built silo fields close to its border with Mongolia](#). The move marks a decisive shift in the scale, readiness and operational logic of its nuclear deterrent. The configuration is closely tied to China's pursuit of an early-warning counterstrike (EWCS) posture—a concept equivalent to LOW.

In December 2024, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) conducted rapid, successive ICBM launches from a training center, an activity consistent with rehearsing the procedures required to fire multiple silo-based missiles under time pressure, according to the report. This silo loading effort is reinforced by parallel investments in space-based infrared early-warning satellites and large phased-array radars, [which together could allow Chinese command authorities to detect an incoming strike and authorize a retaliatory launch before warheads detonate](#).

While China's total nuclear warhead stockpile was reportedly in the low 600s through 2024, the report emphasizes that this silo expansion signals a qualitative transformation rather than simple numerical growth, enabling faster reaction times, higher survivability and a more credible second-strike capability. [Taken together, these developments suggest China is moving away from a small, recessed deterrent toward a posture designed to operate under high-tempo nuclear crisis conditions, fundamentally altering strategic stability dynamics](#).

According to a March 2025 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists [report](#), China's DF-31 is a solid-fuel, road-mobile ICBM that provides a survivable nuclear second-strike capability. The report notes that the ICBM, first deployed in the mid-2000s, has an estimated range of about 7,200 kilometers and is believed to carry a single nuclear warhead with a yield in the hundreds of kilotons. While the report says that the original DF-31 is no longer prominently listed in recent US assessments and is thought to be gradually retired or replaced by improved variants such as the DF-31A and DF-31AG, which offer a more extended range and greater operational flexibility.

However, the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance (MDAA) [notes](#) that road-mobile DF-31 variants have a circular error probable (CEP) of 300 meters, compared to silo-based variants that have a 150-meter CEP, with the latter enabling more precise strikes. In line with that, the US Army's [ODIN database](#) notes that the DF-31 variant mentioned by the 2025 CMPR report might be the DF-31BJ, a design optimized for loading into underground silos, in contrast to its road-mobile counterparts. [The DF-31BJ may have multiple independently targetable vehicles \(MIRV\) capability and a range of 11,200-13,000 kilometers, enabling it to hit most of the continental US, according to the ODIN database](#).

David Logan and Philip Saunders mention in a July 2025 US Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) [report](#) that the missile variant would allow China to launch nuclear attacks after detecting an incoming strike but before impact. [Logan and Saunders argue that LOW does not formally abandon China's no-first-use \(NFU\) policy, since retaliation still follows detection of an attack. However, they point out that it stretches NFU in practice by compressing decision time, increasing risks of misinterpretation or false alarms and potentially requiring pre-delegation of launch authority—undermining the traditional political restraint associated with NFU](#).

Parallel with those developments, China is also developing its missile defense capabilities. Alex Richter mentions in an [article](#) this month for the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists that China's development of LOW capability is closely tied to enabling strategic missile defense rather than solely facilitating faster nuclear retaliation. Richter notes that effective midcourse interception against long-range ballistic missiles requires the same sophisticated early-warning architecture—infrared satellites and long-range radars—needed for LOW postures. [He says that by building this architecture, China is laying the groundwork for a comprehensive, multi-layered missile defense system](#).

However, he points out that China's credible missile defense could weaken mutual vulnerability, encourage worst-case planning by adversaries and intensify arms-race dynamics as the US seeks ways to penetrate a future Chinese missile shield. These developments would have profound implications in a Taiwan Strait crisis. China's expanding ICBM force strengthens its confidence in a survivable second strike, enabling greater nuclear risk-taking in a Taiwan conflict to [deter US intervention and manage intra-war escalation](#), according to a November 2023 Atlantic Council [report](#).

The report argues that China may increase nuclear readiness, issue veiled nuclear threats or signal stress on its NFU posture under crisis pressure to reinforce deterrence, even if doing so introduces escalation risks. At the same time, China's nuclear modernization faces significant challenges. China's small reserve of highly-enriched uranium (HEU) [~14 tons in May 2025](#), as per the International Panel on Fissile Materials, pales in comparison with the [US's estimated 481 tons in 2024](#) and [Russia's 680 tons of unirradiated HEU in 2024](#).

That relatively small reserve could limit the number of China's nuclear warheads – a limitation China may seek to offset by improving accuracy or experimenting with alternative delivery concepts, including fractional orbital bombardment systems (FOBS). China is also grappling with military corruption that could be undermining its

nuclear modernization. The US DoD's 2025 CMPR notes that ongoing corruption allegations since 2022 have affected senior PLA leadership, particularly in areas tied to weapons procurement and equipment development.

The report highlights the removal of former defense minister Li Shangfu over corruption linked to his tenure overseeing the Central Military Commission's (CMC) Equipment Development Department, warning that such disruptions could have short-term effects on readiness and modernization, including strategic deterrence and nuclear-related procurement, even as the PLA presses toward its 2027 goals. **Taken together, China's silo surge, early-warning push and creeping LOW logic signal not just a bigger arsenal, but a far riskier nuclear posture—one that sharpens deterrence while quietly eroding the guardrails that once kept a great-power crisis from racing toward catastrophe.**

President Trump made the statement that US forces have already started conducting land operations in Venezuela. President Trump, speaking at a joint news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said the U.S. could carry out further military strikes against Iran if the country attempts to replenish its ballistic missile stockpile or restart its nuclear program

From the Archives

Guess Essay from the Archives

Iran Nuke Debate Is Another Narrative Collapse
RealClearDefense.com, Mar. 11 | James Van de Velde

The debate about 'when and if' Iran might develop a nuclear weapon is a series of misleading narratives. The issue is much simpler than the Biden Administration, the media, and most analysts portrayed: if Iran has enough weapons-grade (90+ percent pure) Uranium 235 -- and the minimum quantity necessary is about 33 pounds (15 kilograms) -- it **has** a nuclear weapon. In December, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General, Rafael Grossi, claimed that Iran is accelerating its uranium enrichment to up to 60 percent and already has enough material to make four nuclear weapons if its material is enriched further.

From the Archives #2: The Missile Defense Corner Update

Report: A Missile Defense Review for the United States
Heritage Foundation, Mar. 11 | Robert Peters

Adversaries in Beijing and Moscow are developing an increasing array of nuclear-capable missiles that can threaten the American homeland and overseas bases, even exploring the possibility of putting nuclear weapons on fractional orbital bombardment systems—a development that threatens global stability. America's adversaries clearly seek to undermine American interests and constrain America's freedom of action. The United States will not wait for these adversaries to threaten the American homeland with missiles carrying nuclear weapons or other strategic payloads. The United States will field the defenses it needs to deter or defeat any missile threats to the homeland—be they mixed missile salvos as seen in Ukraine and the Middle East, or lower-escalation pathway attacks that seek to influence U.S. decision-making and terrorize the American people.

Congressional Nuclear/Missile Defense Developments

Congressional Comments re Golden Dome and US Missile Defense Programs [From CQ Sources]

With most of the program's plan, such as it is, ordered to be classified, lawmakers are limited in how much they can say about what they know — and what they don't know. **Leading Republicans on the defense panels said in interviews in December they now have more information than they did earlier in the year. Some said that is sufficient for now.** But several senior Democrats who oversee the project, as well as King (who caucuses with the Democrats), said they do not have enough information to gauge the system's cost or effectiveness. Several lawmakers and senior aides said they have not been told even the most fundamental elements.

For example, a knowledgeable Senate aide said by email that Congress still has not been provided with “the full details of the architecture, mapping different systems to threats and the relevant interdependencies.” Nor have the defense oversight committees received “a realistic timeline,” “an analysis of the technological maturity of the components” or “any information whatsoever on costs,” the aide wrote. **Rep. Mike D. Rogers, R-Ala., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said he received a late-autumn briefing with more “granularity” about the Golden Dome plan. But Rogers suggested it is still not 100 percent complete or clear.**

“We’re starting to get a better idea of what it’s going to look like,” Rogers said. Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., the chair of the Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittee, which oversees missile defense programs, **said she is “comfortable with the information I have received.”** Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware, the top Democrat on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, like many other Democrats, agrees with the goal of improving protection against missile threats. But Coons said Golden Dome is still essentially a vague promise. “The Pentagon, six months into this, owes us a clearer path forward and plan,” Coons said.

The manager of the Golden Dome program, Space Force **Gen. Michael Guetlein, said in a speech in December that the program’s secrecy is needed for security. He said he hopes to be able to say more publicly about the program’s goals in 2026.** He also said he has met with several hundred industry executives. Guetlein has briefed House authorizers and appropriators on the program in recent weeks, including a meeting on Dec. 17 with the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. **Rep. Betty McCollum of Minnesota, the top Democrat on that panel, attended the briefing.**

McCollum said later, without discussing classified information, that Golden Dome “is not a concept anymore; it’s plans.” She said it would probably be deployed in phases. And she said Guetlein was asked in the briefing a lot about the system’s costs. “If this is something we’re going to do, it has to become part of the base budget,” she said. “Congress is going to be keeping close tabs on the cost of this, and we made it really clear we want total accountability.”

Senator Jim Banks, (R-Ind), former chairman of the Personnel Subcommittee of the HASC when he was in the House of Representatives, spoke about the successful recruiting for the Armed Services:

The previous administration presided over the worst recruitment crisis since our military became an all-volunteer force over 50 years ago. In 2022, the Army set a goal to recruit 60,000 new soldiers, but it only managed to recruit 45,000. **That’s 15,000 soldiers short. And the same thing happened again the following year, when the Army was 15,000 soldiers again short of its 65,000 recruitment goal. When you add up the recruitment losses under President Biden between 2021 and 2025, the Army shrank by 40,000 soldiers** due to a lack of recruits. That’s as many as four divisions of troops.

The Navy fared no better. **In 2023, it was 7,500 sailors short of its recruitment goal of 37,000. In 2024, it was nearly 5,000 short of its goal of over 40,000 new sailors. So, between 2021 and 2025, the Navy shrank by 16,000 sailors,** which is about three aircraft carriers’ worth of United States sailors. Even worse, the then Secretary of the Army argued it was a bad thing that more than 80% of our recruits come from military families. She said there was “a risk of developing a warrior caste in America.”

Guest Essay

Guest Essay #3: Maybe Arms Control Does Have a Future

Wall Street Journal, Dec. 30, Pg. A15 | Thomas Grant and Henry Sokolski

As China makes a global spectacle of its nuclear buildup and Russia threatens to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine, President Trump says he will resume testing nuclear weapons. No wonder everyone thinks arms control is dead. The U.S. withdrew from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019 [Editor’s Note: Russia was violating the treaty] and since then has dropped two other arms-control agreements, the Open Skies Agreement and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. {Editor’s Note: Russia was violating the treaty on European arms as well}. Meanwhile New Start, which caps Russian and U.S. weapons deployments, expires in February. [Editor’s Note: Which Russia has violated the past 4 years].

As China makes a global spectacle of its nuclear buildup and Russia threatens to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine, President Trump says he will resume testing nuclear weapons. No wonder everyone thinks arms control is dead. The U.S. withdrew from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019 and since then has dropped two other arms-control agreements, the Open Skies Agreement and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. Meanwhile New Start, which caps Russian and U.S. weapons deployments, expires in February. One possible bright spot ahead is the April Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference at the United Nations in New York. The U.S. can take advantage in those talks of its right to deploy nuclear weapons to get China and Russia to pull back on their nuclear-weapons misbehavior.

China, Russia, and the U.S. disagree about Articles I and II of the NPT, which prohibit letting nonweapons states gain "control" of nuclear weapons. Russia insists its recent redeployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus doesn't violate the NPT, but that America's efforts to upgrade its forward nuclear-weapons deployments in Europe do. China argues both Russian and U.S. stationing of nuclear weapons on foreign soil are illegal under the NPT. The U.S. believes its own and Russia's forward deployments are legal.

Washington could cut this knot in three steps. *First, continue to upgrade nuclear weapons storage sites in Britain, Europe, South Korea and Japan. Second, increase its joint nuclear exercises with all interested allies. Third, invite Germany, Poland, Balkan allies, Finland, Sweden, Turkey, South Korea, Japan and Australia to implement a RAND proposal to fund the refurbishment of at least 100 nuclear warheads the Pentagon is planning to dismantle. The U.S. would keep the weapons in an escrow account on U.S. soil to deploy in a crisis if asked.*

These steps -- especially the last -- would prompt immediate Russian and Chinese protests. Washington could then invite Chinese and Russian diplomats to field their concerns at arms-control negotiations. It's easy to anticipate what each would say. China would insist that Washington do nothing to redeploy nuclear weapons to South Korea or Japan. Russia would be no less adamant that the U.S. forgo nuclear weapons redeployments to any member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. U.S. negotiators could then ask: What are China and Russia willing to offer in exchange?

Russian nuclear provocations and Chinese nuclear buildup have rattled U.S. allies. *That's why they have requested that the U.S. back its security guarantees with a threat to use nuclear weapons if necessary. It's also why some allied officials have suggested deploying nuclear weapons on their soil. The U.S. would prefer not to, but it will be difficult to say no unless China and Russia reduce the nuclear activities that are giving rise to these demands.*

Might Russia consider withdrawing its in-theater nuclear weapons to the east of the Urals in exchange for a U.S. withdrawal of its approximately 100 weapons from NATO countries? Would China freeze production of separated plutonium by shutting down its spent-fuel recycling plants? Would China and Russia finally allow three-way nuclear arms reduction talks (something China has rejected repeatedly)?

The Pentagon and State Department should find out at the NPT Review Conference. Beforehand, the U.S. should call for a clarification of the meaning of "control" and "nuclear sharing" under Articles I and II of the NPT. *This would prompt China and Russia to repeat their arguments, which are at odds with each other and with the U.S. position. Then American diplomats could clarify what the NPT means by "control" in a way beneficial to all three parties. This would lead to a discussion of nuclear limitations on each party in exchange for pledging no redeployments on foreign soil.*

Many observers think the NPT Review Conference is a ceremonial event. Neither the White House nor the State Department has said what the U.S. position will be at the conference -- an omission worth correcting.

The first Trump administration argued correctly that China should live up to its Article VI obligation to negotiate nuclear arms control in good faith. It should stick to its guns in the coming conference and add the concerns about nuclear sharing and control.

--Mr. Grant, a senior fellow at the Lauterpacht Centre for International Law at Cambridge, was senior adviser for strategic planning in the State Department's Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation (2019-21) and is author of "Nuclear Arms Control in Peril." Mr. Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, served as the Pentagon's deputy for nonproliferation policy (1989-93) and is author of "China, Russia and the Coming Cool War."

About the ICBM EAR

Peter Huessy's ICBM EAR Report was originally prepared for the USAF in 1981 to help inform US nuclear deterrent policy professionals at the height of the Cold War. Eventually it was provided only to key elements of the Nuclear related Aerospace Industry. The objective: help build an informed political community on nuclear deterrent issues, especially the deployment of the US nuclear deterrent, especially the MX (Peacekeeper) missile. The report covered developments in the nuclear arena on a weekly basis, including developments in Congress, key events, threat assessments, remarks of top US officials, international activity key to US security interests, nuclear budget and program element issues, and arms control and proliferation matters as well.

Weekly ICBM EAR Report

Prepared by Peter Huessy

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Contact: PHuessy@ThinkDeterrence.com

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