

Weekly ICBM EAR Report



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

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ICBM EAR Week of February 23, 2026, Prepared by Peter Huessy, President of Geostrategic Analysis, Senior Fellow, NIDS and Senior Fellow, Gold Institute for International Strategy

Summary

Our Quotes of the Week highlight good news about Golden Dome; a summary of the important developments re the joint Israeli-USA strikes against Iran; key administration developments are highlighted; international nuclear developments include discussions of extended deterrence in Europe, Japan, Korea and Taiwan; extensive coverage and analysis of China's nuclear testing; review of the benefit of the SLCM-N; a look back at the wisdom of Colin Gray; an extensive review of Sentinel and uploading the 400+ silos; Admiral Studeman on the Chinese nuclear buildup; and links to the Ear's previous reports and published essays for 2025-6.

[The EAR today is a day late as we wanted to include the initial news about the joint Israeli and United States strikes against Iran.]

Quotes of the Week

AFGSC commander Air Force Gen. Stephen Davis: "And I would tell you, I don't think we have the answer [for Sentinel silos] exactly how we're doing that yet, but we have more flexibility."

Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Arms Control and Nonproliferation Christopher Yeaw: "China has "deliberately, and without constraint, massively expanded its nuclear arsenal."

Secretary of State Rubio: "The President strongly believes that for any nuclear agreement in the 21st century to be legitimate, it has to involve the United States, Russia, and China."

Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas G. DiNanno: "I had a good discussion [on Wednesday] with [South Korean] Vice Minister for Diplomatic Strategy and Intelligence Jeong Yeon-doo. The USA-ROK alliance remains the linchpin of peace, security, and prosperity for Northeast Asia, supported by our ironclad extended nuclear deterrence."

President Trump: "Iran [is] working to reconstitute its nuclear program and of developing missiles that would "soon" be capable of reaching the United States."

President Trump: "My preference is to solve this problem through diplomacy, but one thing is certain: I will NEVER allow the world's number one sponsor of terror to have a nuclear weapon. We have to be strong. It's called peace through strength."

Rep. Don Bacon (R-NE): "Great to welcome Admiral Richard Correll and Command Sergeant Major JoAnn Naumann as they assume new leadership positions at USSTRATCOM. Nuclear deterrence is job one. Strengthening our nuclear command and control systems is my top priority this year."

From Nuclear Expert Bill Siegert, SAIC reminds us: "Democracy is two wolves and a lamb deciding what to have for dinner. Liberty is a well-armed lamb." B. Franklin

NORAD: Together, we remain ready to defend our homelands from every avenue of approach.

General Whiting: "When the Golden Dome initiative was announced," leaders from the two commands "went to the Pentagon and said, 'Hey, we want to co-write the requirements document for the Golden Dome.' [We] received "an instant thumbs up."

General Guillot: "When Golden Dome first was discussed, I think some thought it would be a 2040 Buck Rogers type of capability, and it's not," he said. "It's much closer. And a lot of the capabilities are there."

Lt Gen Michael Lutton (Deputy Commander, Strategic Command): "Our three combatant commands are actually a part of an executive council that supports him in his role that he's been tasked by the President to accomplish."

Congressional Strategic Developments

Congressman Hamadeh had the honor of hosting U.S. Navy Adm. Rich Correll, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, and Command Sgt. Maj. JoAnn Naumann, USSTRATCOM's Senior Enlisted Leader, for an introductory meeting. We truly appreciate their time and dedication to our nation's strategic deterrence," according to a post from Rep. Abe Hamadeh's office.

International Strategic Developments

The objective of the strikes on Iran is to eliminate much of the offensive military capability of the regime, including its missile launch systems, its Navy, its security forces, and its key leadership. According to Nial Ferguson, ***early Saturday morning, air strikes rained down on Iran, as the United States and Israel launched a joint operation against military installations across the country. The attack follows weeks of indirect negotiations that ended in stalemate. "They've rejected every opportunity to renounce their nuclear ambitions," President Donald Trump proclaimed this morning. "We can't take it anymore." On Saturday afternoon, Israeli officials said that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had been killed.***

Prior to the strike, the Iranians and its allies sought to portray talks with the United States as making progress. One news report cited Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi, the mediator of the talks, as saying "significant progress" had been made and that there was agreement to meet on a technical level in Vienna next week.

The White House remained open to dialogue with Pyongyang "without any preconditions," a day after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un expressed a willingness to talk with the United States.

French President Emmanuel Macron is expected to outline an update to France's nuclear deterrence policy in a speech on Monday, promoted by concerns in Europe that Russian war-making could spread beyond Ukraine.

Strategic Developments by the Administration

Air Force Global Strike Command: "Our top leaders recently visited @28thBombWing to assess readiness for the @usairforce B-21 Raider beddown & meet the Airmen making it happen alongside their continued efforts of maintaining B-1B Lancer readiness & global taskings."

Congrats to NG and the USAF. The Air Force announced that it reached an agreement with Northrop Grumman to expand annual production capacity for the B-21 Raider by 25% in order to accelerate delivery of the service's next-generation stealth bomber fleet.

A U.S. Strategic Command Bomber Task Force transited from the Indo-Pacific into Alaska, through Canada, and into the Continental U.S., NORAD's Alaskan, Canadian, and Continental U.S. Regions capitalized on the opportunity to execute and coordinate sequential tracking and intercepts of an American B-52 Stratofortress, acting as a simulated threat to North America.

U.S. Navy Adm. Rich Correll, commander, @US_STRATCOM, recently visited Los Alamos National Laboratory, where he met with Director Thom Mason.

China

Nuclear Testing and China: Two Views

From CNN/News Sources:

The US assessment of China's intention to radically advance its nuclear weapons is fueling debate inside the intelligence community and beyond over whether there has been a shift in Beijing's thinking on nuclear strategy, the sources said.

The investment in its nuclear arsenal is pushing China closer to peer status with Russia and the US **and could yield technical capabilities neither of the two dominant nuclear powers currently possess**. China secretly conducted an explosive nuclear test in June 2020 at the Lop Nur facility, in the country's northwest – despite a self-imposed moratorium on such activity that has been in place since 1996 – and was planning to do more in the future, according to the sources and recent statements from US officials. While the 2020 test was disclosed publicly by US State Department officials this month, the purpose of the test has not been previously revealed.

Evidence collected as part of a subsequent review of the June 2020 event, has led US officials to conclude the test **was motivated by China's pursuit of next-generation nuclear weapons, the sources familiar said. That includes efforts to develop additional weapons systems capable of delivering multiple, miniaturized nuclear warheads from a single missile. China also appears to be developing low-yield, tactical nuclear weapons – something the country has never previously produced – that could be deployed against targets closer to home, including in scenarios where Beijing responds to a potential US defense of Taiwan, the sources added.**

The Quincy Institute and Chinese Testing

The Trump administration has accused China of secretly testing a nuclear weapon in 2020. The group that monitors nuclear tests worldwide, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), **says it couldn't confirm a test actually occurred. China has rejected the accusations, calling them a distortion of its nuclear policy.** Instead of treating this as a technical disagreement for international institutions to sort out, **the Trump administration appears to be using these claims to push for restarting U.S. nuclear testing “on an equal basis.”**

Last October, President Trump announced he had instructed the Pentagon to "begin testing our nuclear weapons." **Earlier this month, Undersecretary of State Thomas DiNanno said that the U.S. believes China carried out “yield-producing” nuclear explosive tests, including one on June 22, 2020, at the Lop Nur test site in northwestern China.**

Last week, Assistant Secretary Christopher Yeaw gave more details. He pointed to a seismic signal at 09:18 UTC, arguing it looked more like an explosion than an earthquake or mining activity. U.S. officials also accused China of using “decoupling,” which is a technique to try to hide the seismic signature of a test.

Europe

Why Europeans are considering their post-America nuclear options

Europeans are looking---at least rhetorically--for alternatives to US extended nuclear deterrence. Leaders should find confidence in electorate support for strengthening nuclear deterrence through European cooperation

European council on foreign relations (Germany), Feb. 26 | Rafael loss....according to ECFR's latest public opinion poll, fewer Europeans than ever consider the united states under President Donald trump “an ally that shares our interests and values” fueling Europeans' desire for alternative models of nuclear deterrence. Britain and France, Europe's two nuclear-armed NATO allies, are central in the resultant conversations. Britain's nuclear weapons have long been committed to the defense of the alliance, whereas France's deterrent sits outside of the NATO framework. As such, French president Emmanuel macron's address on nuclear deterrence, which is due to take place on March 2nd, is sure to draw particular scrutiny.

American officials have different take and point out the Trump administration's push for a "NATO 3.0" merely represents the strategic rebalancing at the heart of the new US National Defense Strategy. This means Europeans assume responsibility for conventional deterrence and defense while the US remains committed to extended nuclear deterrence for its European allies. US undersecretary of defense for policy, Elbridge Colby, argued at the Munich Security Conference that America had "over-assured" its European partners in the post-cold-war decades; he suggests that some "anxiety" on their part would motivate and accelerate European efforts to rearm.

According to NATO, French and British nuclear forces already "contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance." This is largely because London and Paris represent "separate centres of [nuclear] decision-making" that complicate potential adversaries' risk calculations—meaning it is not just Washington's resolve and capabilities they must consider when contemplating an attack on the alliance.

Yet there are reasons why NATO leaders frame these efforts to strengthen European deterrence as complementary to the US extended nuclear deterrent, and not in lieu of it. For one, neither France nor Britain have had the ambition to extend nuclear deterrence like the US. Their arsenals evolved in the shadow of America's expansive cold-war nuclear posture, which consisted of tens of thousands [Editor's note: Peak number was around 10,000 strategic warheads] of strategic nuclear warheads and several thousand tactical nuclear weapons forward-deployed on allied territory in Europe and Asia.

--Rafael Loss is a policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. His work focuses on security and defense in the Euro-Atlantic area; military operations, innovation, and technology; and nuclear strategy and arms control.

Ukraine

Ukraine Update: Does Putin really expect anyone to believe his ridiculous nuclear claims?

Vladimir Putin's Kremlin has once again reached its habitual instrument of coercion: nuclear intimidation. This week Russian officials alleged, without a shred of credible evidence, that the United Kingdom, with French support, is supplying Kyiv with nuclear weapons and "dirty bombs." They went so far as to suggest that such an act would justify a Russian tactical nuclear strike on London and Ukraine.

The claims are patently absurd. They are not being made because Putin believes in them but in order to justify nuclear threats. The nuclear threats are made in order to deter Ukraine's allies and reduce their support. This is being done because the Russian regime urgently needs the situation to change in its favor. Russian casualties in Ukraine are now mounting at an unsustainable rate and Moscow is struggling to find the 35,000 fresh troops it needs every month simply to maintain its current tempo and positions.

As we edge into the fifth year of what was originally advertised as a "three-day special military operation," fissures are appearing at home. Soldiers' families are speaking out with growing boldness. The Russian economy is under palpable strain: inflation bites, living standards erode and the social contract frays. The Russian public is not the compliant monolith the regime prefers to imagine. There is mounting resistance to general conscription and a dawning realization that this war is not being fought for Russia's security, but for Vladimir Putin's personal ambition.

--Colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon was commander of both UK and Nato Chemical, Biological, Radioactive and Nuclear (CBRN) forces

Korea

[Report: The United States–Republic of Korea Alliance: Strengthening Extended Nuclear Deterrence in a Shifting Strategic Landscape](#)

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, FEB. 26 |

Victor Cha is President, Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Department and Korea Chair; Choi Kang is President, Asan Institute for Policy Studies; and Katrin Fraser Katz is Adjunct Fellow (Non-resident), Korea Chair

For the past seven decades, the United States' extended deterrence commitment to the Republic of Korea (ROK) has been critical to advancing two central aims of the alliance: (1) deterring North Korean aggression and (2) preventing nuclear proliferation by giving South Korea a credible alternative to developing its own nuclear arsenal. Today, however, a shifting geopolitical environment has introduced new areas of uncertainty into the alliance. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies and CSIS engaged in a joint project from late 2025 to early 2026, including a full-day workshop to assess extended nuclear deterrence cooperation within the U.S.-ROK alliance. The select group of experts and former officials discussed the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments and brainstormed ways to strengthen these commitments amid heightened uncertainty and evolving security challenges in the region. The key observations and recommendations of the project recorded in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of every participant in the study, or the positions of either organization.

Nuclear Policy

[LINK TO PDF OF FULL REPORT](#)

[Future-Proofing U.S. Nuclear Policy: Forecasting Security Outcomes of the Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile \(SLCM-N\)](#)

NEWAMERICA.ORG, FEB. 26 | AMY J. NELSON AND MARIAM KVARATSKHELIA

While debate over the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) has long been framed around whether the system is stabilizing or destabilizing, our analysis shows that its strategic value depends primarily on future conditions—not on the system itself. This report finds that SLCM-N is unlikely to be a decisive contributor to U.S. deterrence in the most plausible future the United States faces.[The EAR presents this essay despite disagreeing with its premise. But also believes supporters of enhancing our theater nuclear deterrent need to know the nature of the opposition to its development, even though Congress has in the FY2026 defense authorization and appropriations bill supported a robust R&D program for eventually deploying the SLCM-N.]

Using expert interviews, scenario planning, and probabilistic forecasting, this project evaluates how SLCM-N performs across four plausible futures in the mid-2030s. We find that disagreement over the system is driven less by disputes over technical facts than by fundamentally different assumptions about how future crises will unfold—how adversaries interpret U.S. intent, how escalation is managed amid uncertainty, and how technological change affects deterrence and signaling.

Across methods, the most likely future is Adaptive Deterrence, characterized by disruptive technological change and a U.S. nuclear posture largely perceived by allies and adversaries as defensive. In this future, SLCM-N provides limited and conditional value, functioning at most as a selective hedge rather than a decisive deterrent capability. The system has its greatest effect in a less likely future—Assertive Stability—where technological change is steadier and U.S. nuclear posture is viewed as offensive. Overall, the findings show that SLCM-N is not a “magic bullet” in any future: Its impact is contingent on how it is communicated by the United States, how it is perceived by adversaries and allies, and how it is integrated in future crisis scenarios. In the most likely future, its benefits are modest and easily offset by misperception risks if poorly employed.

--Amy J. Nelson is Director for the Future Security Scenarios Lab at New America and a Senior Fellow in the Future Security Program.

NIPP

NIPP Honors Colin Gray

Gray Proves Window of Vulnerability Wide Open

The recent NIPP publication of essays by top nuclear expert Colin Gray included an analysis of missile defense dynamics. One recent analysis excused the SALT I and II allowed built up of Soviet era nuclear warheads up to the 24,000 level under certain assumed force structures as necessary because of US plans to build missile defenses [Safeguard] in the Johnson administration, although proposed at the time as a defense against an emerging but small Chinese nuclear arsenal.

The Gray essay proved correct in that the Soviet Union did choose to deploy strategic forces admirably well suited to defeat *Safeguard*, save only for the fact that *Safeguard* deployment effectively was aborted by the ABM Treaty of 1972. ***In retrospect, it appears to be the case that the doctrinal leitmotiv for Soviet strategic force development is a determination to effect counterforce success. Safeguard was not a threat to Soviet urban/ industrial targeting; rather was it a threat to hard target counterforce planning.*** 'SALT agreements, to date (actual and proposed), simply have recorded the extant strategic nuclear balance. A major reason why that process was placed on diplomatic "hold" in 1980-81 was because its achievements were either very modest or even negative in American assessment. In short, the USSR pushed hard with President-elect Nixon in late 1968 because the ***Kremlin believed that while the US missile defense would not undermine Soviet retaliatory deterrence, it would undermine Soviet first strike counterforce threats, threats that over time came to be described as a "window of vulnerability" that had seriously deteriorated the strategic force balance between Moscow and Washington.***

Space

SpaceNews Online, Feb. 25 | Sandra Erwin WASHINGTON –

The commanders of three key combatant commands said they have been deeply involved in shaping the requirements for the Pentagon's Golden Dome missile defense initiative.

Speaking Feb. 24 at the Air & Space Forces Association Warfare Symposium in Aurora, Colorado, Gen. Stephen Whiting, commander of United States Space Command, described close collaboration with Gen. Michael Guetlein, the Golden Dome program manager. Gen. Michael Guetlein has just been a fantastic partner throughout this ... and we've been fully engaged with his office," Whiting said. "We have sent liaison officers to sit in the Pentagon with his team for months at a time to really make sure we're as tightly connected as we can be," he added.

Golden Dome is a proposed layered U.S. missile defense architecture intended to protect the homeland against ballistic, hypersonic and cruise missile threats by integrating ground-, air- and space-based sensors, interceptors and command-and-control systems into a unified network.

The envisioned architecture includes a substantial space layer, potentially involving hundreds or thousands of satellites for sensing, tracking and interceptor coordination. As the combatant command responsible for military operations in the space domain, Space Command would be expected to help integrate those space-based assets into joint fire-control networks and protect them from interference.

Essay of the Week

#1 Essay of the Week:

Number Of Nuclear Warheads New Sentinel ICBMs Will Carry Now An Open Question

We now know much more about the USAF's sprawling plans for new Sentinel ICBM silos with features not found on Minuteman III.

TWZ.com (The War Zone), Feb. 25 | Joseph Trevithick and Howard Altman

Whether or not the U.S. Air Force's new Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) will carry multiple warheads remains to be seen now that a key arms control treaty has expired. The service is otherwise hopeful that the Sentinel program is now on the right track after years of major delays and ballooning costs, driven heavily by costs and complexities associated with building new infrastructure. A particularly key issue has been the matter of silos, with the original plan to repurpose the ones that currently house Minuteman III ICBMs having been abandoned in favor of all-new construction.

Air Force and other U.S. military officials, as well as a representative from the Sentinel's prime contractor, Northrop Grumman, shared new updates about the program. Sentinel has been undergoing a complete restructuring since delays and cost overruns triggered a legal requirement for a full review back in 2024. The original plan had called for the new Sentinel ICBMs, also designated LGM-35As, to begin entering operational service in 2029. Minuteman III, of which there are 400 currently sitting in silos across five states, was to be phased out by 2036.

The setbacks also mean that ongoing work on Sentinel is now occurring free from the limits on America's nuclear arsenal that were imposed by the New START treaty with Russia. That agreement sunset, as scheduled, earlier this month without a follow-on deal in place.

A Sentinel Program official declined to say how many warheads could be loaded onto a single Sentinel missile when asked at a press briefing earlier today. The publicly stated plan previously has been to load each missile with a single W87-1 warhead.

Each of the Minuteman III ICBMs in service today, which are also designated LGM-30Gs, is topped with either a single W78 or W87 warhead, the result of a succession of arms control agreements culminating in New START. The LGM-30G, which entered service in 1970, was originally designed to carry up to three warheads, and retains this so-called multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capability.

"We have the ability to do that. That's obviously a national-level decision that would go up to the President," Navy Adm. Rich Correll, head of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), told TWZ and others at a separate roundtable today, speaking generally about the prospect of the U.S. fielding ICBMs in a MIRV configuration again. "Those policy levers, if needed, provide additional resiliency within the capabilities that we have."

"Nothing's changed since [the] expiration of the New START treaty. The threat environment that existed before [the] expiration of the New START Treaty exists today," Correll added. "So that decision space is open, and discussions will occur at a senior policy-making level to make decisions with respect to that. I would reserve any recommendations I have for that discussion within the Department."

Earlier this month, Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC), under which the currently Minuteman III force falls, also told TWZ that it "maintains the capability and training to MIRV the Minuteman III ICBM force" and that it would be prepared to do so "if directed by the President."

We do know that the Sentinel missile is a new design with a **three-stage solid fuel rocket booster** that has been described as slightly larger than the Minuteman III. Under the shroud on top is a **payload bus with a liquid fuel propulsion system**. "Our liquid propulsion system, this is what gives us the fine point that allows us to place the re-entry vehicle precisely on target, that greater accuracy that comes with the Sentinel system," the Northrop Grumman official explained at today's press briefing. Beyond improved accuracy, the Air Force and Northrop Grumman have said that Sentinel will also offer greater range, as well as reliability and sustainability benefits, compared to the Cold War-era Minuteman III. Though more specific details about Sentinel's capabilities are classified, developing a new ICBM does provide the opportunity to incorporate various new features and functionality, including when it comes to survivability.

“At this point, we have completed testing on all of the major elements of the missile system. ... We met all of our primary objectives and are [on] a good course to first flight, which is why we have confidence that we’re going to hit that pad launch in 2027,” the Northrop Grumman official added. “What we’re working on now are additional tests just to give us confidence” when it comes to “reliability and integrating that system. “The Air Force first announced it was targeting a Sentinel first flight in 2027, from a launch pad above ground, last week. The service has yet to share when it expects to conduct the first test launch from a silo. Northrop Grumman is now building a full-scale prototype silo facility in Promontory, Utah, but it is unclear whether that will be constructed in a way that would allow it to be used for test launches in the future. As an aside, the New START treaty had also imposed limits on deployed and non-deployed “launchers,” which included silos for ICBMs.

As mentioned, the topic of silos has been absolutely central to the Sentinel program and its troubles over the years. Originally, the Air Force expected to be able to reuse Minuteman III silos but subsequently determined that this was not the optimal course of action. **The plan now is to construct 450 entirely new silos. The Air Force hopes this will actually save time and money now, in part because of the ability to leverage modern modular construction methods from the start rather than trying to repurpose decades-old structures. [Editor Note: As USAF officials predicted previously.]**

“The original acquisition strategy for Sentinel was to use and reuse the Minuteman III silos for the housing of the Sentinel missile, with some upgraded communication rooms and things next to it. Over the past year, we’ve gone through multiple assessments to figure out what the right strategy is as we look forward, and we’ve changed our acquisition strategy to go after building and constructing new silos for Sentinel,” the Sentinel Program official explained today. “That came out of really kind of two primary things. The first reason we looked at this is just the variability of refurbishing Minuteman III silos. **The Minuteman III silos are amazing, and they are incredibly efficient at executing the mission today. But as we were going down the path of trying to plan, just like trying to renovate a house built in the [19]60s, there was variability in understanding how you would attack refurbishment, how you would understand the conditions, and the timing, and the cost associated with that.**”

The Air Force also sees new silos as helping ease the transition process from Minuteman III to Sentinel. Both missiles will be in service simultaneously for a time to ensure the land-based leg of America’s nuclear deterrent triad remains credible throughout the process.

“As we were looking at opportunity space, we found a squadron at Malmstrom [Air Force Base in Montana], which was the first one, that was still owned Air Force land, but allowed us what I would call swing space,” the Sentinel Program official noted. “If we constructed there, how we sequence and how we choreograph, taking down Minuteman and bringing Sentinel up on alert, it allowed us the opportunity to do that without impacting operations today. And going after that swing space, it actually drove us to designing and constructing new silos, as there were not Minuteman III silos available to be reused on those sites.

New silos “also captured a few things that we were working through on risk, primarily around human factors and some other things that were existing in the reuse of Minuteman, it allowed us to get those and reduce those as we went forward,” they added.

“We knew and had some assumptions at the beginning. We had to test out those assumptions,” they also said when asked about why these issues were not recognized earlier on. “As we’ve tested out those assumptions, some of them proved false, which is why we’ve been going down the path of laying in, prototyping, experimentation, and showing progress on how do we say, ‘Hey, this is a different way of approaching it.’”

“To suggest they weren’t thought about, I think that would be probably short-sighted. They were very much thought about. I think that we often forget that these are very challenging programs. This is something we have not done in over six decades,” Air Force Gen. Dale White, Director of Critical Major Weapon Systems and direct reporting portfolio manager to the Deputy Secretary of War, also said at the roundtable. “Some of the assumptions that did come to fruition have actually provided more operational advantages. We’ve made changes along the way.”

“With the decision to recapitalize the intersite communications and build new launch silos, it’s opened up a lot of additional possibilities,” AFGSC commander Air Force Gen. Stephen Davis also said at the roundtable. “And I would tell you, I don’t think we have the answer exactly how we’re doing that yet, but we have more flexibility.”

The aforementioned prototype silo in Utah is being built to help further burn down risk.

“There are many things that we’re looking to prove out through this risk reduction activity, excavation techniques, how we integrate the modular elements of the silo, too. How we protect from weather conditions and how we do

transportation to and from the site – critically important,” the Northrop Grumman official said. “And we will ultimately use this as we start to integrate and perform operations around missile emplacement, those kinds of things.”

Despite the “swing space” found to exist on Air Force-owned land, the Sentinel program is still expected to require the use of other U.S. government-owned land and the acquisition of additional land from private entities. The full extent of those additional land requirements is still being assessed. What will happen to the decommissioned Minuteman III silos is still to be determined, as well.

Though they are the most important aspect, silos are only one part of the massive infrastructure development plans baked into the Sentinel program. A total of 24 new launch centers and three new missile wing command centers are also set to be built. The new ICBM force will be spread across 32,000 square miles in five states and linked together by more than 5,000 miles of new fiber optic lines.

“The wing command center is actually a new capability being provided by Sentinel that doesn’t exist today for Minuteman,” the Sentinel Program official said. “Today at Minuteman, the information is more siloed. The structure of Minuteman is built around the [missile] squadron, and there isn’t a sole place where the information is pulled together, to give you the battlespace awareness of the entire wing at one time.”

“So, the wing command center is where that fiber backbone is incredibly important,” they continued. “The quantity of data that can be pushed on fiber, from my physical security monitoring for health and status of the missiles and of the launch facilities, all can be integrated here into a common picture that allows the operational commander the ability to see what is going on in the missile field and take the appropriate action and prioritize where they are using their resources, their Airmen, to tackle the problems and the solutions.”

The first of these facilities is now being built at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming. That base is also set to host initial prototyping efforts related to the fiber optic cable laying, which is set to be a huge undertaking led by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Air Force is now aiming to start fielding Sentinel sometime in the early 2030s. How long it will take to complete the transition from Minuteman III to the ICBMs is unclear. The service has said it is at least “feasible” to keep some number of Minuteman IIIs on alert until 2050, according to a past report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), a congressional watchdog.

The U.S. military continues to stress that the new Sentinel ICBMs and modernized infrastructure that will come with them are top national security priorities. Despite debates in the past about the utility of the land-based leg of the triad, it does remain the fastest nuclear response option in the Pentagon’s strategic portfolio. It also has a continued purpose that would force any opponent to expend substantial resources on trying to neutralize it in a future nuclear exchange.

The global geostrategic environment has also evolved in ways that further bolster the case for Sentinel, particularly when it comes to China drastically expanding its nuclear arsenal. Other global crises, including Russia’s ongoing war with Ukraine, together with other proliferation and strategic weapons development concerns, are factors, as well.

“The fact of the matter is that both the offense and defensive threats ... have evolved significantly” since Minuteman III was fielded, Gen. Davis said today. “We’ve gotten all the capability that we can out of the Minuteman, but Sentinel will bring Air Force Global Strike Command and USSTRATCOM important new capabilities that we need to keep up with the threat and to stay ahead of it. There are many questions the Sentinel program clearly still has to answer, including how many warheads each missile should carry, as it moves toward finally reaching an operational capability in the next decade.

Speaking at an AFA Warfare Symposium roundtable about the prospect of the U.S. fielding ICBMs in a MIRV configuration following the expiration of New START, USSTRATCOM Commander Adm. Richard Correll said that the Pentagon has “the ability to do that,” while underscoring that it is “a national-level decision that would go up to the President,” The War Zone reported.

PLA and China

Wise Words from Admiral Studeman former head of Navy Intelligence

PLA fastest developments in human history even tempo quality of military buildup over time; the US was distracted and going after ISIS, the Taliban. We did not have the conversation with the American people about China was up to and what the US should do about it. There was a debate within the intel community with many thinking China's growth was purely a regional issue and not global.

Looking at the volume and capacity of the PLA growth—it's truly awesome. Near peer? China in many instances is a peer now and some cyber, space and other technology is first class. It's a real capability. What a nation spends its GDP for is critical and China spends on technical, diplomatic and information development on top of their strong military buildup.

The US stovepipes its diagnosis—we have a thousand different analyses. Military power is not the sole indices of power. China's industrial base can be converted latent power to real power. US base became too small although efficient but to convert to real power is difficult. China aims to expand its political power and shape the views of nations throughout the world and thus influence state behavior. China wishes to do this short of war. US assumes if one deters war, we win. But China expands its political and economic power and influence without war and does daily. This is not just an issue over Taiwan or Trade. Xi will first get a 4th term March 2028 then he may move on Taiwan....greatest danger is this period.

US intelligence agencies tie Chinese explosive test to push for a completely new nuclear arsenal

CNN.COM (EXCLUSIVE), FEB. 21 | ZACHARY COHEN AND KYLIE ATWOOD

US intelligence agencies believe that China is developing a new generation of nuclear weapons and has conducted at least one covert explosive test in recent years as part of a broader push to completely transform its nuclear arsenal into the world's most technologically advanced, according to multiple sources familiar with the US intelligence assessments.

The US assessment of China's intention to radically advance its nuclear weapons is fueling debate inside the intelligence community and beyond over whether there has been a shift in Beijing's thinking on nuclear strategy, the sources said. The investment in its nuclear arsenal is pushing China closer to peer status with Russia and the US and could yield technical capabilities neither of the two dominant nuclear powers currently possess.

China secretly conducted an explosive nuclear test in June 2020 at the Lop Nur facility, in the country's northwest – despite a self-imposed moratorium on such activity that has been in place since 1996 – and was planning to do more in the future, according to the sources and recent statements from US officials. While the 2020 test was disclosed publicly by US State Department officials this month, the purpose of the test has not been previously revealed.

Evidence collected as part of a subsequent review of the June 2020 event, has led US officials to conclude the test was motivated by China's pursuit of next-generation nuclear weapons, the sources familiar said. That includes efforts to develop additional weapons systems capable of delivering multiple, miniaturized nuclear warheads from a **single missile**.

China also appears to be developing low-yield, tactical nuclear weapons – something the country has never previously produced – that could be deployed against targets closer to home, including in scenarios where Beijing responds to a potential US defense of Taiwan, the sources added.

China has been aggressively expanding its nuclear sites, US intelligence officials have previously reported publicly, with analysts suspecting that China might be pursuing new technologies. Now US officials believe there is strong evidence to support that theory – in part – because of what it has learned about the 2020 test.

China has had a nuclear arsenal since 1964. It has produced warheads faster than any country in the world, although the size of its arsenal trails far behind Russia and the US, which continue to own the lion's share of the world's nuclear weapons.

Asked about the US intelligence assessments of its nuclear program, a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington told CNN that "the United States has distorted and smeared China's nuclear policy."

"This is political manipulation aimed at pursuing nuclear hegemony and evading its own nuclear disarmament responsibilities," Liu Pengyu said. "China firmly opposes such narratives. US allegation about China conducting a nuclear test are entirely unfounded. China opposes any attempt by the United States to fabricate excuses for

The Pentagon has previously suggested that China's efforts to expand and improve its nuclear arsenal could "provide [China] with new options before and during a crisis or conflict to leverage nuclear weapons for coercive purposes, including military provocations against US Allies and partners in the region."

A 2024 report from the Defense Intelligence Agency also noted that China is seeking to revamp its nuclear arsenal with the US in mind. China is undergoing the most rapid expansion and ambitious modernization of its nuclear forces in history—almost certainly driven by an aim for enduring strategic competition with the U.S. and a goal to actualize intensified strategic concepts that have existed for decades but are now being realized," it states.

Historically, China has viewed its nuclear capabilities as a means of self-defense and deterring other countries from using or threatening to use their own nuclear weapons against it. China has had a no-first-use policy in place for decades, but the country's 2023 proposal on global governance does not reference that commitment which has invited speculation that China's posture could be changing.

And until recently, China's nuclear capability was considered far less advanced than its nuclear rivals. It has conducted far fewer tests from which it could collect data needed to design modernized weapons. "That, US officials believe, is one of the primary reasons why China would resume explosive testing. "They have a brand new generation of weapons for which they have no database," said one of the sources familiar with the matter.

As part of that modernization push, China has been investing heavily in maneuverability and survivability, multiple sources told CNN, noting Beijing has long feared the US could potentially wipe out its entire force before it can shoot back – or at least inflict enough damage to effectively neuter it. US officials also believe China has had concerns over the reliability of its own systems, which contributes to the urgency surrounding its modernization efforts and fueled investment in technologies to ensure its nuclear warheads can hit their intended target.

Two sources noted that China appeared increasingly paranoid about a potential US attack during the same timeframe as that June 2020 nuclear test. In the lead-up to the 2020 US presidential election in November of the same year, Chinese officials even reached out to then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley because they were concerned about an "October surprise," the sources said.

While those tensions ultimately subsided, China has taken steps in the years since to not only update its nuclear forces but also sought to modernize its entire military. China's nuclear ambitions have reemerged as a topic of intrigue in recent weeks after State Department officials revealed new details about, what they allege, was an explosive test carried out at the Lop Nur facility in June 2020 – disclosing the exact date, location and related seismic data about the event to support their conclusion. The connection to China also using the test to modernize its arsenal became clear in the follow-on study of the test, particularly given the seismic magnitude, a former senior official told CNN.

Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Yeaw told an event at the Hudson Institute think tank in Washington this week the June 2020 event measured an "explosion" of magnitude 2.75. "I've looked at additional data since then. There is very little possibility I would say that it is anything but an explosion, a singular explosion," said Yeaw, adding that the data was not consistent with mining blasts. "It's also entirely not consistent with an earthquake," said Yeaw, a former intelligence analyst and defense official who holds a doctorate in nuclear engineering. "It is ... what you would expect with a nuclear explosive test."

Earlier this month, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control Thomas DiNanno also publicly accused China of having secretly carried out an explosive nuclear test in 2020 and suggested the US had obtained intelligence indicating Beijing planned to carry out more. "I can reveal that the U.S. Government is aware that China has conducted nuclear explosive tests, including preparing for tests with designated yields in the hundreds of tons. The PLA (People's Liberation Army) sought to conceal testing by obfuscating the nuclear explosions because it recognized these tests violate test ban commitments," DiNanno said during a February 6 speech.

CNN has since learned that additional intelligence collected by the US after the June 2020 event served as a key piece of the puzzle as experts have argued that the seismic data is not, on its own, enough to definitively conclude it was a nuclear test or understand why it was carried out. When asked about the allegation of secret nuclear testing earlier this month, Liu, the spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, DC, said China "follows a policy of 'no first use' of nuclear weapons and a nuclear strategy that focuses on self-defense, and adheres to its nuclear testing moratorium."

"We stand ready to work with all parties to jointly uphold the authority of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty and safeguard the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime," he said. "It's hoped that the US will earnestly abide by its obligations under the Treaty and its commitment to a moratorium on nuclear testing and take concrete actions to uphold the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, as well as global strategic balance and stability," he told CNN.

The timing of the Trump administration's decision to reveal details about an alleged test that took place nearly six years ago is also notable as it comes as the US is insisting China join any new nuclear arms agreement, overtures Chinese leader Xi Jinping has so far resisted, sources said. Trump has suggested the US could resume explosive testing of its own.

Ultimately, China has more to gain from conducting explosive tests than the US, raising questions about why the State Department took the rare step of disclosing specifics about the event from June 2020 at this point, multiple sources said. That move suggests the Trump administration is concerned about public diplomacy with Beijing – particularly ahead of the president's upcoming trip to the country in April, one source familiar with discussions between the two countries noted.

But current US officials also noted that the Trump administration is determined to draw China into a nuclear deal, suggesting that the revelation of a slice of what the US knows about their current efforts could pressure them into discussions. "The old arms control paradigm is collapsing as China races to grow its nuclear arsenal," said Alex Gray, former NSC chief of staff and now senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. "The Administration is grappling with not just Russian strategic weapons but a much more concerning Chinese nuclear expansion. Unless we can negotiate an arms control framework that encompasses Beijing, the US doesn't need to mindlessly adhere to outdated arms control nostrums that don't capture the threats of today and tomorrow."

The rapid growth and modernization of the PLA also serves as a fulfilment of Xi's more than decade-old promise to transform the world's largest armed forces into a world-class military. "This is a reflection of China's sweeping global ambitions ... this is one of the clearest signals of that of almost anything that China is doing," one of the sources added, noting Beijing's actions must inform how the US prepares for future conflicts.

Japan

U.S. and Japan discuss China's 'destabilizing' nuclear buildup and testing JAPAN TIMES ONLINE (JAPAN), FEB. 22 | JESSE JOHNSON

Japan and the U.S. have held regular talks on the United States' "nuclear umbrella," the two sides said Sunday, with discussions also focusing on China's "destabilizing nuclear weapons buildup and testing."

The meeting, known as the Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD), came amid growing U.S. and Japanese tensions with China over Beijing's push to expand and modernize its nuclear arsenal — an issue broached during the talks.

"The two delegations discussed China's rapid, opaque, and destabilizing nuclear weapons buildup and testing, as well as Russia's historical noncompliance with arms control," the Defense Ministry said in a statement. "The United States reiterated the need for multilateral strategic stability and arms control talks. Japan welcomed the U.S. intention to achieve a better agreement and emphasized the importance of involving Russia and China."

The United States said last week that it is ready to carry out low-yield nuclear tests to match alleged secret explosions by China — even as Washington called for a broader arms control treaty after the New START pact, the last treaty between the U.S. and Russia that limited deployment of nuclear warheads, expired this month.

At the talks held at the State Department in Washington last Wednesday, the allies also "reaffirmed the United States' commitment to the defense of Japan, using the full range of U.S. defense capabilities, including nuclear."

"The delegations concurred that U.S. nuclear posture and policy, as well as increasing Japan's investments in its conventional defense capabilities, play a significant role in deterring and, if necessary, responding to aggression in the region," the statement said, adding that Tokyo's "support to U.S. operations that maintain peace ... contributes to reinforcing U.S. deterrence by denial."

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The EDD, the second under the current administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, involved senior defense and diplomatic officials, including participants from the Japan Joint Staff, U.S. Joint Staff, U.S. Strategic Command and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. China was believed to have loomed large in the meeting.

U.S. intelligence agencies believe that China is developing a new generation of nuclear weapons — part of a broader push to completely transform its nuclear arsenal into the world’s most technologically advanced, CNN reported Saturday, citing multiple sources familiar with the U.S. intelligence assessments. As part of this push, China also appears to be developing low-yield, tactical nuclear weapons — something the country has never previously produced — that could be deployed against targets closer to home, including in scenarios where Beijing responds to a potential U.S. defense of Taiwan, the report said.

The Pentagon hinted in its 2022 Nuclear Posture Review that China’s efforts to expand and diversify its nuclear weapons could provide Beijing “with new options before and during a crisis or conflict to leverage nuclear weapons for coercive purposes, including military provocations against U.S. allies and partners in the region. “Officials in Tokyo are believed to be particularly concerned about the use of nuclear weapons in any conflict over self-ruled Taiwan, which China claims as a renegade province and has vowed to bring under its control.

Japan and the U.S. discussed scenarios involving the potential use of nuclear weapons as part of the EDD talks last July, a media report at the time said. Last week’s talks, which included a regular tabletop exercise, noted that the two sides had also broached the issue of “strengthening the alliance’s strategic messaging (and) crisis communications.” China’s nuclear weapons advances are seen as a key driver of Japan’s own defense buildup, with a senior government adviser to Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi reportedly even telling journalists in December that Japan — the sole country to be attacked with nuclear weapons — should have its own arsenal.

While developing its own nukes is likely a bridge too far, Takaichi has sidestepped questions over a possible rethink of the country’s long-held three non-nuclear principles of not producing, possessing or allowing nuclear weapons into Japanese territory, as her government looks to overhaul its National Security Strategy.

Citing sources familiar with U.S. intelligence assessments, CNN reported that China is developing a new generation of nuclear weapons and that a covert explosive test in 2020 is “part of a broader push to completely transform [China’s] nuclear arsenal into the world’s most technologically advanced.”

At an Extended Deterrence Dialogue meeting in Washington last week, American and Japanese officials discussed China’s “rapid, opaque, and destabilizing nuclear weapons buildup and testing, as well as Russia’s historical noncompliance with arms control,” and the two sides also reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to defending Japan “using the full range of U.S. defense capabilities, including nuclear,” according to the Japan Times, which cited a defense ministry statement.

And in a video message published on Russia’s “Defender of the Fatherland Day,” President Vladimir Putin said that developing his country’s nuclear forces remains an “absolute priority,” according to Agence France-Presse.

Access to PRH Essays and Reports

On the NIDS website our readers can find my ICBM reports and other essays: [Peter Huessy's Corner - National Institute for Deterrence Studies](#). This is where we house his ICBM reports and essays.

His articles are on Global Security Review. Here is a link to one of them: [Making Nuclear Blackmail Great Again — Global Security Review](#). You can go to the search button on this site and type in "Huessy" to find his articles.

For those who cheered our Olympian men and women winning the Gold Medal in two 2-1 overtime wins.



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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