



PENTAGON REPORT ON CHINESE MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS: AN ASSESSMENT

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Pentagon recently released its annual report to the US Congress on China's military build-up titled, *"Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020,"*¹ a tradition that the Pentagon has embarked upon for the last two decades. The report encapsulates various ingredients of China's military plans - land, air and sea - to become the "world-class military" by the end of 2049 - a goal first announced by General Secretary Xi Jinping in 2017.²

The report reflects the military balance between Washington and Beijing since the release of the National Defense Strategy in 2018. It makes claims regarding China's desire to multiply its stockpile of nuclear warheads in the next decade, and alleges that the Chinese military has already equaled or surpassed the US in a series of key areas, including warheads designed to carry atop ballistic missiles that can reach the US mainland. The report further claims that Beijing is well on its way to become a match for the US or even exceeds the power of the US armed forces as it now controls the largest navy in the world, with roughly 350 ships and submarines compared to 293 for the US.

In an attempt to unveil China's growing military muscle, the report highlights the strategic insecurities of the US that come with the rise of China as a dominant military power in the world, a

¹ "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020," *Annual Report to Congress*, Office of the Secretary of Defense, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

² "Decoding China's Vision for New Era World-Class Army," *CGTN*, July 30, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-30/Xi-Jinping-envisions-world-class-Chinese-army-in-new-era-SyxbICP16/index.html>

title that the US has held since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, in order to achieve that domination, China has to be able to project power worldwide and that means bases - maritime, land, and air - around the world. To facilitate such superiority, the report accuses Pakistan and other countries of providing China locations for military logistics facilities, a claim rejected by both Islamabad and Beijing.³

For policymakers in Washington, what is striking are the efforts made by Beijing to restructure the PLA into a force better equipped for joint operations through improving its overall combat readiness and by encouraging new operational concepts as well as expanding its overseas military footprint. The report suggests that Pakistan and China see each other as an amenable ally. Both share a long history of cooperation, economic partnership, and a large market for arms sales and trade with potential for growth. Moreover, with the support of China, Pakistan can step-up in South Asia against India. This is seen as an alarming concern not just for India but also for the US. Through Pakistan, China is also finding a better showcase for its security and surveillance technology⁴ in a place once defined by its close military relationship with the United States.

Building on the same narrative, Pakistan's eastern neighbor, India, has called Pakistan as the 'chosen one' through which China is building its military logistics facilities in the region that will allow Beijing's military forces to project and sustain military power.⁵ Partnership between Pakistan and China is viewed from the prism of insecurities by not just Washington but also New Delhi, who routinely chastises the relationship as militaristic in nature and a replacement of the position once held by the United States. New Delhi fears that in a wave of a conflict between China and India, Islamabad will open up on India's north-western front to aid Beijing.⁶ While India criticizes Pakistan's partnership with China, it has chosen to ignore its own reliance on the US in order to become a strong arm in the region.

India believes that Pakistan and China are tying CPEC to the latter's military ambitions through building infrastructures under the shadow of an economic partnership and is of the view that some

³ "China Setting Up Military Logistics Facilities In Pakistan: US Report," *Express Tribune*, September 7, 2020. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2262857/china-setting-up-military-logistics-facilities-in-pakistan-us-report>

⁴ Maira Abi-Habib, "China's 'Belt and Road Plan' in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn," *New York Times*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/world/asia/pakistan-china-belt-road-military.html>

⁵ "China Using Pakistan for Military Logistics Facilities," *Times of India*, September 7, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/international/china-using-pakistan-for-military-logistics-facilities-us-report/videoshow/77985041.cms>

⁶ "Pakistan's Choice: Make Peace With India Or End Up As A Chinese Vassal State," *Times of India*, September 9, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-editorials/pakistans-choice-make-peace-with-india-or-end-up-as-a-chinese-vassal-state/>

of China's biggest projects in Pakistan have clear strategic implications.⁷ India shares the same apprehensions as the US and hence views China's expansion as a threat. New Delhi fears that with access to Karachi and Gwadar ports in Pakistan for turnaround facilities for its submarines and warships, China has the ability to maintain a strategic upper hand and dominance in the region and is further consolidating its presence in the Indo-Pacific.⁸

The Pentagon through this report has also tried to put forth an expose on Beijing's atomic firepower. The US government has tried to warn the world of Chinese ambitions to take over as an unreliable superpower that is trying to flex its military muscle under the umbrella of economic and infrastructure developments throughout the globe. The analysis of Beijing's nuclear arsenal is the first of its kind and is seen as an attempt by the US to get China to engage in discussions on nuclear arms control. The report further projects China's ambitions to double and modernize its nuclear forces, which naturally comes as a red flag for Washington. In its current arsenal, China has an estimated 100 warheads on land-based ICBMs capable of threatening the US, a number that is expected to grow to roughly 200 over the next five years.⁹

The report falls nothing short of blame games and finger-pointing by the US on its proclaimed new arch-rival. It highlights China as an expansionist power with an appetite to maintain its presence not just on the Korean Peninsula but around the globe. It accuses Beijing to reach the same powerful influence as the US with the application of near-term strategies and asymmetric strategies which are focused on a very specific threat in a very specific place, an element that has nonetheless, increased the Chinese level of threat to US assets in recent times. The report reiterates and overstates China's capacity to devote a considerable amount of resources to its armed forces due to the substantial size of its economic and manufacturing base. It suggests that with such capacity at hand, China is marching towards military domination in a targeted way, with an increased focus on power-projection capabilities along its borders and around the globe. Washington fears that in case of a military escalation, the geography China is embracing upon will work heavily to its advantage. And to win, the US might wind up feeling the need to attack Chinese missile launchers on mainland soil as well as its command and control networks. An antiphon that will only result in an escalation with a

⁷ Maira Abi-Habib, "China's 'Belt and Road Plan' in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn," *New York Times*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/world/asia/pakistan-china-belt-road-military.html>

⁸ "Eye On China: India, Japan Sign Mutual Military Logistics Pact," *Times of India*, September 10, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/eye-on-china-india-japan-sign-mutual-military-logistics-pact/articleshow/78034976.cms>

⁹ "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020," *Annual Report to Congress*, Office of the Secretary of Defense, pp. 56, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

certain response by China with attacks against the US bases in Japan or beyond. Such a scenario would be highly fraught with danger and not easily or confidently won by either of the parties.

The Pentagon report has come out at a time when the US is not only going through internal clashes but upcoming elections where President Trump stands at a weak wicket. Strong anti-China rhetoric may as well be the green card in his campaign to regain momentum and support by deviating attention from internal issues.

Many of the claims made in the report have been denounced by Pakistan and the Chinese Foreign Ministry. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has called the report 'biased'.¹⁰ Furthermore, China lodged a stern remonstrance to the US after the release of the report that recklessly distorts China's image as a responsible global power.¹¹

¹⁰ "China Rejects Pentagon Claims Beijing Planning To Double Nuclear Warhead Stockpile," *RT*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/news/499672-china-us-nuclear-warheads/>

¹¹ "China Lodges Representation Over Pentagon Report On China's Military Development," *Global Times*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200752.shtml>