



China's Nuclear Inventory

China began a nuclear weapons program in the 1950s with significant help from the Soviet Union, which contributed advisors and technical equipment. When Sino-Soviet relations cooled at the end of that decade, China moved forward on its own and successfully [tested](#) its first nuclear weapon in October 1964. China is the last of the five nuclear weapon states recognized under the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) to develop a nuclear program.

China's nuclear strategy centers around deterrence through "assured retaliation." This means that China believes it has the ability to [survive](#) an initial nuclear attack and retaliate proportionately. China keeps its nuclear weapons on low alert, meaning warheads and missiles are stored separately until they are paired in preparation for a strike. Consistent with its nuclear posture, China maintains a No First Use policy (NFU), which means it [will not](#) be the first to use a nuclear weapon in a conflict; rather, it will only use nuclear weapons in retaliation for a nuclear attack against its territory or military personnel. In viewing recent Chinese statements and investments, some experts have begun to question China's commitment to this policy.

How Many?

It is [estimated](#) that China has a stockpile of around 350 nuclear warheads. These weapons can be delivered by air, sea and land – completing a nuclear triad once China's strategic bombers are deployed. While Beijing has long focused on maintaining a minimum deterrent, it is likely that its nuclear stockpile will increase in the next few decades. Additionally, if the United States continues to expand and strengthen its missile defense program, China may [modify](#) its nuclear posture to include a significantly larger nuclear force with the potential to strike the United States.

Air

Historically, the air-based component of the Chinese triad has been a low priority for the nation. China currently possesses a small number of air-based platforms for nuclear weapon delivery, but is [expected](#) to bring a new strategic bomber and air-launched ballistic missiles into operation. That may include the development of a new nuclear-capable subsonic strategic stealth bomber, the Xian [H-20](#), which could enter service as early as 2025. This will be [very similar](#) to the U.S. B-2 bomber.

Sea

China has four Jin-class nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), with two more under construction. Each SSBN can carry up to 12 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) known as JL-2. These missiles are believed to have a range of [7,200 kilometers](#), which gives China the ability to target Alaska, Guam, Hawaii, India and Russia from Chinese waters. The only way for China to target the continental United States would be if the Jin-class submarines traveled deep into the Pacific Ocean, but they would most likely be noticed by U.S. [Maritime Patrol Aircrafts](#).

Land

It is estimated that China currently has [around 240](#) nuclear-capable land-based missiles that can deliver 272 nuclear warheads. In recent years, China has deployed three road-mobile nuclear-capable versions: the CSS-5 Mod 6, the [DF-26](#) intermediate-range ballistic missile, and the [DF-31AG](#) intercontinental ballistic missile launcher. It is believed that the [DF-15](#), first fielded in the 1990s, is China's only [nuclear-capable](#) land-based short-range ballistic missile.