



## The America-Eurasia Center's International Security Program

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# Foundations for a New Arms Race The Western Allies vs Russia and China



*The breakout of Nuclear Armed Forces is occurring as the Major Nuclear Nations, China, USA, and Russia, increase or improve the accuracy of their nuclear arsenals.  
Photo Credit: Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*

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# Foundations for a New Arms Race

## The Western Allies vs Russia and China



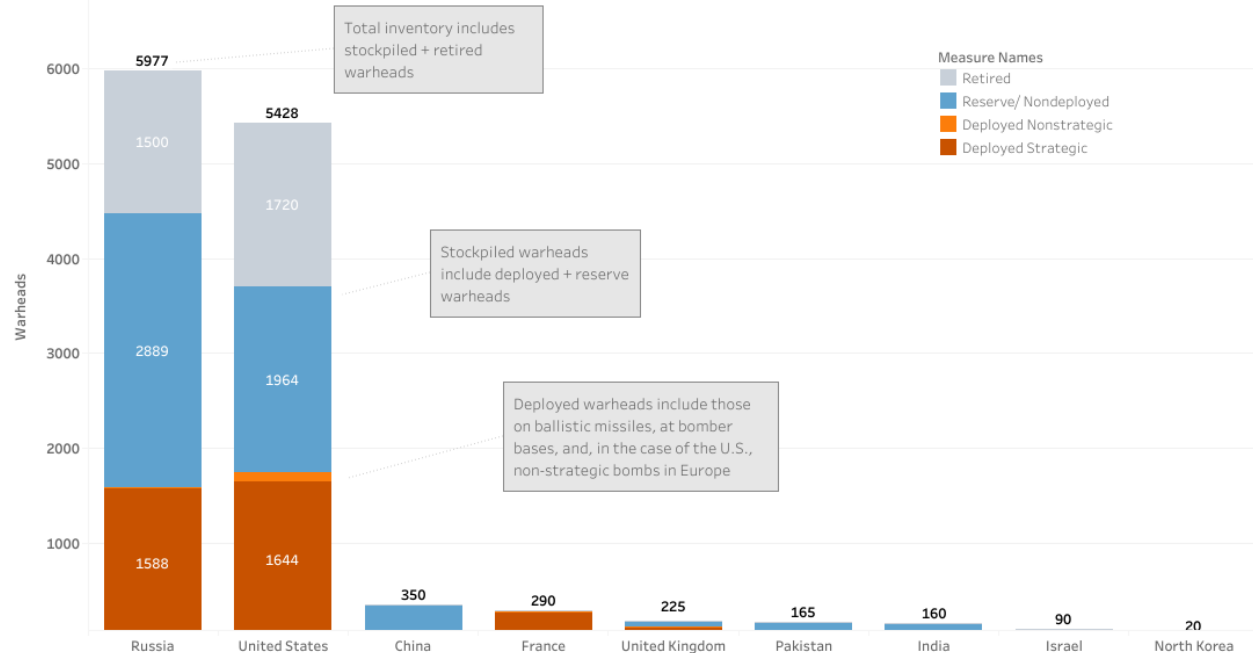
The US has upgraded its employment of B61-12 nuclear bombs in the European Theater precision guided missile which could be deliverable via F-35s. Photo Credit: TheDrive.com The War Zone

The invasion of Ukraine has again put the spotlight upon nuclear weapons. Not since the Cold War has the world been on the verge of nuclear war as it is today. Today, it is not only the US and Russia (formerly the USSR), but also China, who in recent years has placed increased importance upon nuclear weapons and what they mean for the country. As tensions rise, all three could be headed in the directions of a modern arms race that extends beyond nuclear to new, dangerous capabilities.

## Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Inventories, 2022

Last updated: 23 February 2022

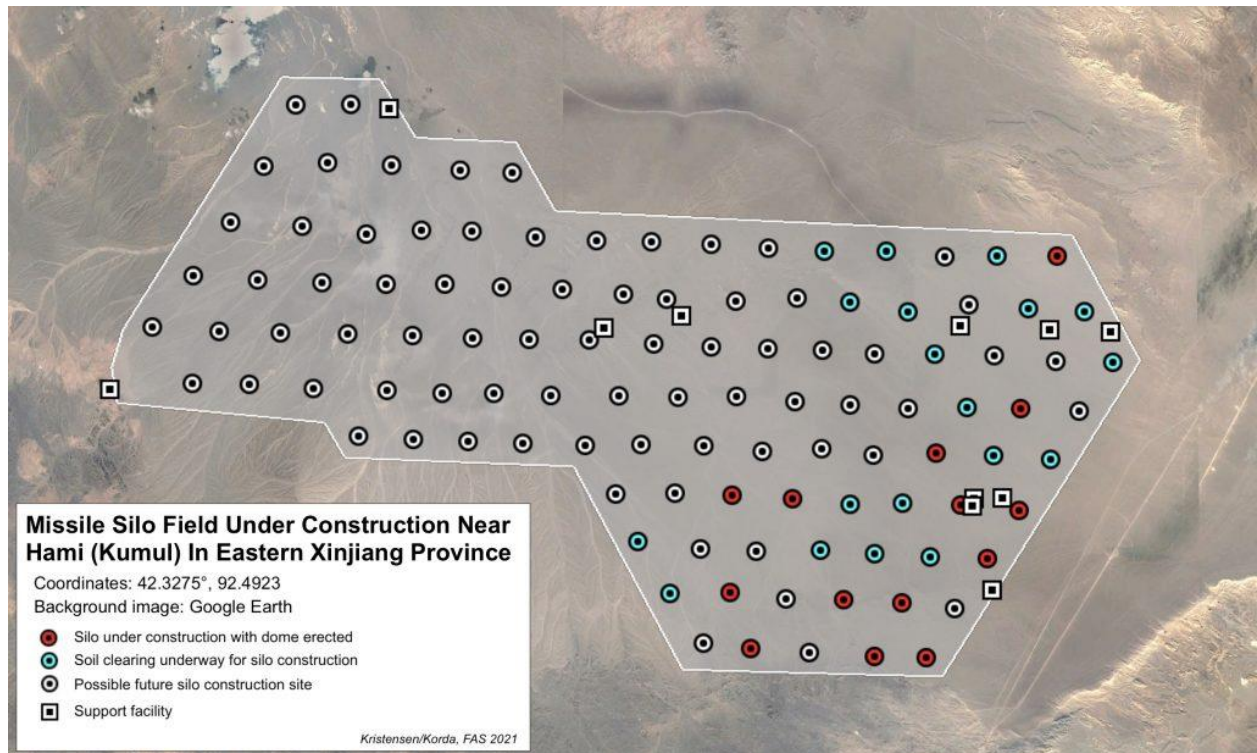
Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, and Robert Norris, Federation of American Scientists, 2022



## The United States

The US spent \$754 billion USD on defense in 2021, 3.29% of its GDP. This is more than the next 5 countries combined, including Russia and China. Even so, with all this defense spending, America is headed into uncertainty. For the first time, the United States will need to deter two major nuclear powers that are increasingly strengthening their strategic postures against the US, as well as their relationship. A Russia that is more comfortable rattling the nuclear saber and a China bent on increasing its nuclear armaments. As both continue to issue problematic and concerning threats, the US will likely continue its massive investment in new upgrades to its arms capabilities to deter both Chinese and Russian aggression. The new Defense 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS), along with the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and Missile Defense Review (MDR) categorizes the threat from Russia as acute and recognizes China as growing danger.

The United States has long viewed Russia as a nuclear peer, while current government officials believe that China has both the intent and the increasing economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to reshape the international order. President Joe Biden went as far as to say that tensions are as high as they have ever been since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, due to Russia's war in Ukraine and China's stance on the Taiwan issue. US officials and NATO allies have communicated catastrophic consequences if Russia were to use a nuclear weapon, both publicly and privately. However, they have not yet commented on a nuclear response if an attack were to take place. If the Putin regime is backed into a corner, there is no telling how they would respond to increasingly punitive measures imposed upon them, while the US and allies formulate possible nuclear and non-nuclear responses to such escalation.



## China

For China, nuclear weapons represent a way to protect itself and expand. Traditionally, they have maintained a minimalist nuclear policy, maintaining a certain amount of nuclear weapons to deter its adversaries. They were estimated to have around 350 nuclear warheads in 2021. However, they have begun a massive nuclear and non-nuclear-arms buildup meant to be more competitive with the United States. Evidence was uncovered of China building over 200 new missile silos, highlighting their efforts to modernize their strategic forces. Additionally, they have been developing other nuclear/non-nuclear capabilities, including space-based technologies, such as fractional orbital bombardment systems (FOBS), artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities and hypersonic weapons.

Chinese Armed Force are the largest in the world, with over two million active members. China's military spending has been on an uninterrupted rise for 26 years. In 2021, the country spent 1.23% of its GDP on military expenditures, around 207.3 billion USD. It is estimated that China's Navy will increase nearly 40% between 2020 and 2040. Their nuclear stockpile is expected to number at around 1,000 by 2030. China's massive investment in its military capabilities, might lead to a security dilemma with other nations in the region, where one side's efforts to modernize their forces, causes others to feel less secure, thus causing them to invest more in their own military capabilities, increasing tensions and potentially leading to an arms race.



Russia's SS-27 mod 2 ICBM

Photo Credit: Bulletin of Atomic Scientists

## Russia

Russia is in possession of the largest nuclear stockpile in the world, at around 5,997 warheads, although a number of those have been retired. Of those, 1,912 are considered tactical nuclear weapons, weapons with a lower explosive potential or “yield” and range than strategic weapons, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). The country maintains a fully operational nuclear triad, that is, the ability to deliver nuclear weapons by land, air, and sea effectively. A document released in 2020 by the Russian Federation titled the “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence” outlines the circumstances under which a nuclear weapon might be used, and who has the authority to order their use. Nuclear weapons are reserved for situations in which:

- A nuclear weapon or weapons of mass destruction is/are used against Russia or its allies
- A conventional aggression that threatens Russia's existence
- Ballistic missiles that are already in flight and heading for Russia or its allies
- An attack on the government or military that jeopardizes Russia's nuclear response capabilities.

According to the document, only the Russian president has the capacity to make a decision regarding their use.

Since the start of its invasion in Ukraine on February 27, President Putin has put Russia’s nuclear forces on a state of “special combat readiness.” He has alluded to the threat of nuclear war, stating

that they are “not a bluff” referring to his threats. These threats are also echoed by senior officials of the Russian Government, such as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. As the country faces a series of setbacks during its invasion of Ukraine, they will increasingly rely on nuclear weapons for their strategic planning. However, as of writing this, Russia has yet to withdraw from the New START treaty, the only remaining arms control treaty in the world, where both the US and Russia commit to decrease the size of their nuclear arsenal.

While they are unlikely to increase their arsenal, the annexation of Ukrainian territory raises the possibility for a nuclear response according to Russian nuclear doctrine. As those annexed territories are reclaimed by Ukraine and Russian forces withdraw, in this context, nuclear weapons could be used in order to force Ukraine to capitulate and/or deter Ukrainian allies from supplying vital resources to the war effort. Even then, this action might lead Russia to alienate what little allies it has left.

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