THE ILLUSION OF CONVERGENCE

INTERROGATING CHINA-RUSSIA NUCLEAR PARALLELS

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Introduction

"Understanding differences between the drivers of Russian and Chinese nuclear behaviour can help inform deterrence and escalation management."

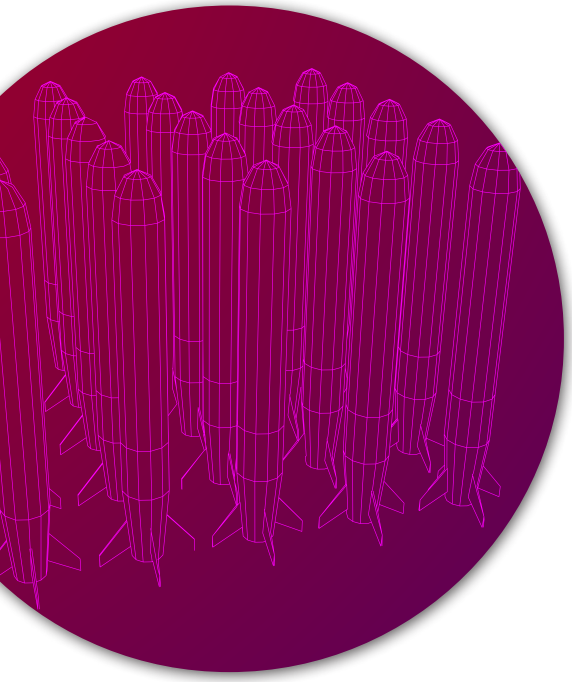
In January 2025, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock was set, for the first time, to under 90 seconds. The scientists cited a leading risk factor in taking this drastic step: the ongoing war in Ukraine and its potential to escalate into a nuclear conflict at any moment.[1] In addition to Russia's nuclear-bolstered aggression towards Ukraine, arsenal expansion in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become a point of concern in newspaper headlines and policy circles alike, often inspiring comparisons between these two powers, their nuclear toolkit and strategic goals.[2]

NATO's 2024 Washington Summit Declaration concluded that the "deepening strategic partnership between Russia and the PRC and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut and reshape the rules-based international order, are a cause for profound concern."[3] As the two countries strengthen their strategic partnership and the Chinese arsenal begins to narrow the gap in size and diversity with the Russian arsenal, is Chinese nuclear behaviour likely to converge as well?

This article offers some critical reflections about the extent to which this apparent alignment of interest and partial convergence in arsenal size translate into comparable behaviour in the realm of nuclear strategy. After all, experts on Russian nuclear behaviour warn that "Western scholars often presume that strategic theory is universal,"[4] creating an environment in which misinterpretations and misperceptions could take hold. Better understanding the nuances that shape strategy, doctrine, and equipment choice in these distinct cases, then, is important in mitigating this risk.

We argue that deepening strategic relationships and simultaneous PRC arsenal expansion do not mean that China will engage in a close nuclear partnership with Russia, display the same strategic behaviour as Russia or the USSR, or that its proliferation is motivated by comparable drivers. We further argue that understanding differences in the drivers of Russian and Chinese nuclear behaviour is vital because much of NATO's historic experiences are shaped by interactions with the USSR during the Cold War and contemporary relations with Russia.

Applying lessons from this historical experience is likely to be ineffective even as China's arsenal grows to appear more similar to Russia's. Understanding differences between the drivers of Russian and Chinese nuclear behaviour can help inform deterrence and escalation management in the short term as well as arms control efforts in the long term.



Chinese and Russian Nuclear Arsenal Modernization

Current estimates tally the Russian nuclear stockpile at 4,309 weapons.[5] Of those, 1,718 are deployed strategic warheads with around 870 as land-based missiles, 640 on submarines, and around 200 at air bases.[6] The PRC, in contrast, possesses around 600 nuclear warheads across a triad, but is intent on rapidly expanding its arsenal with estimates ranging from 750 to 1,500 warheads by 2035.[7]

While claiming to still abide by the obligations set out in the strategic nuclear disarmament treaty New START, including the number of deployed warheads remaining around 1,700, in parity with the United States, Russia is in the process of concluding a nuclear modernization programme. The programme focuses "in particular on the development of the SS-X-29 (Sarmat) heavy ICBM, the SS-27 Mod 2 (Yars) ICBM, and the Dolgorukiy (Borei) class SSBN."[8]

Russia is capable of equipping the majority of its intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and its submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with multiple warheads per missile.[9] It stations most of its strategic nuclear warheads on ICBMs, but has become keen on replacing Soviet-era systems with updated Russian designs for land-, air- and sea-based delivery systems.[10] Today, the main purpose of the arsenal is to deter and coerce the United States and NATO, especially in the ongoing war in Ukraine. Furthermore, it is used to deter Ukrainian attempts to move the conflict across the border into Russian territory, threatening severe retaliation.

China's modernization programme, which has accelerated since the early 2020s, covers all legs of the nuclear triad. On land, the PRC is building missile silos for liquid-fuel (DF-5) and solid-fuel ICBMs, developing new delivery systems, and has expanded warhead production. It is enhancing the dual-capable DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile force, likely replacing the DF-21 in nuclear roles. At sea, Type 094 submarines have been upgraded with longer-range JL-3 missiles. In the air domain, some aircraft have been assigned a new nuclear role, including deployment of a suspected nuclear-capable air-launched ballistic missile.[11]

However, the scope of China's nuclear ambitions remains unclear. The PRC claims that arsenal expansions are necessary to maintain its existing second-strike capability against a technologically sophisticated adversary while simultaneously taking actions that could position it to take a more assertive nuclear posture.[12] Some even observe that contemporary Chinese nuclear pursuits are "less cohesive, less coherent, and less aligned with China's specific security requirements than before."[13]

Regardless of the cause, it seems that the Chinese arsenal is likely to grow substantially, partially closing the gap between its current state and the large arsenals of Russia and the United States.

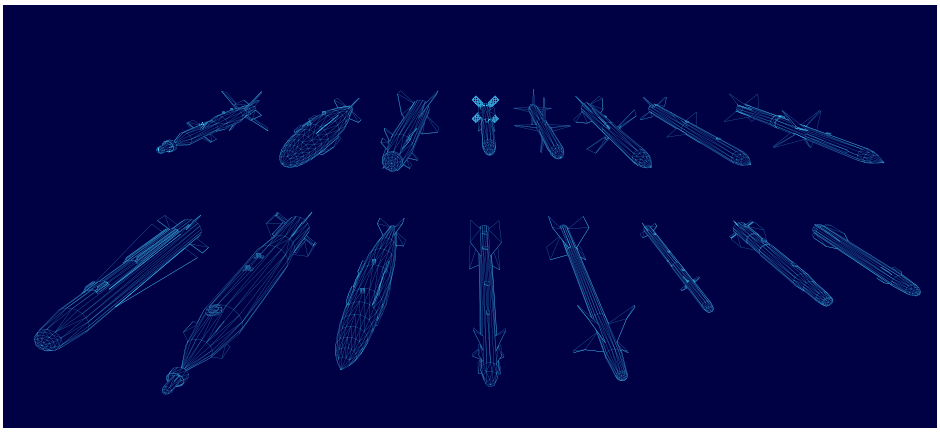
Drivers of Differential Nuclear Behaviour

But will the PRC's expanded arsenal result in a similar nuclear posture to that of Russia or a convergence in nuclear behaviour? We argue that it will not. Even as arsenal sizes and diversity converge, we believe differences in historical experience and strategic context, the political structures driving military strategy, and the organizations making nuclear decisions have resulted in material differences in doctrine, force structure, and weapons systems.

1. Historical experience and strategic context. Russia and China inhabit fundamentally different strategic environments and express divergent (if occasionally overlapping) strategic goals. Even if Chinese arsenal size and diversity expand to resemble that of modern Russia or the former USSR, this difference is likely to result in unique force structure and nuclear behaviour.

Russia's nuclear weapons enterprise began as a USSR project in the shadow of the Second World War, a profoundly destructive conventional conflict, much of which was fought on Soviet soil. In contrast to Eastern China's coastal geography, European Russia's most densely populated and economically productive regions lack a clear geographic buffer, contributing to an intense security dilemma.

Soviet nuclear planners saw a need to both deter ideologically opposed Europeans and Americans from transgressing this historically vulnerable boundary and to fight and win a nuclear conflict, ideally on third-party territory, to preserve Soviet vital interests and maintain



a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.[14] They also saw nuclear parity[15] with the United States as inherently stabilizing, reducing the likelihood and intensity of conventional conflicts amid global geopolitical competition.[16] The balance of conventional military power has shifted away from modern Russia, increasing the importance of strategic weapons to Russia in coercive, deterrent, and warfighting capacities.[17]

In the wake of the Korean War and an increasingly troubled relationship with the USSR, Chinese defence planners of the 1960s saw a nuclear programme as a guarantor of sovereignty and a counter to "nuclear blackmail" — both by the ideologically opposed United States and by the increasingly distrusted Soviet Union. The geographic separation (by ocean or by less populated regions) from these threats reduced the immediacy and intensity of China's security dilemma, shifting the emphasis away from nuclear warfighting towards credible minimum deterrence. Consequently, Chinese planners have historically viewed nuclear weapons primarily as tools for safeguarding territorial integrity, regime survival, and political autonomy, rather than instruments for coercive diplomacy or warfighting.[18] Recent postural changes suggest that defence planners may be re-envisioning this role.

2. Political drivers of development, design, and modernization. Nuclear development plans and procurement policies are not created in a vacuum of strategic necessity. Political beliefs and the bureaucratic structure of decision-making bodies can significantly shape nuclear posture, strategy, and the hardware through which these are expressed.[19]

In both the PRC and Russia, nuclear weapons are seen as an important indicator of great power status. The prestige of nuclear weapons is both a means to desired geopolitical outcomes and an end in itself. This status is also conferred to leaders, with nuclear arsenals contributing to perceptions of strength, competence, or legitimacy. In both countries, this appears to have impacted historical weapons development and is likely a contributing factor to arsenal development today.[20]

The interplay between military-industrial interests and political leadership can also shape nuclear programmes, even in the absence of immediate strategic needs.[21] In Russia, strategic oversight is provided by the president, who also serves as commander-in-chief, and the Security Council of the Russian Federation. They issue guidance and identify strategic needs.[22] The Russian arsenal is supported by a bureaucratically complex but technologically mature defence industrial base inherited from the USSR, including private industries and state-integrated design bureaus.[23] Economic competition between private entities and competition for prestige and recognition among design bureaus drive design choices, contributing to the diversity of Russia's delivery toolkit.[24]

In China, nuclear weapons development is more tightly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with strategic oversight centralized under the Central Military Commission (CMC), chaired by the President and General Secretary of the CCP (currently Xi Jinping). Unlike Russia, where legacy institutions retain a degree of autonomy and inter-bureau rivalry, China's nuclear enterprise is more vertically integrated and therefore more carefully subordinated to party authority.[25] The People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) is responsible for operating nuclear delivery systems, while key research and development is conducted by state-owned entities such as the China Academy of Engineering Physics and the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation.[26] This model has historically allowed technical and policy experts considerable discretion in interpreting broad directives from party leadership, but amid Xi Jinping's push for loyalty and more detailed policy prescription, their role has shifted towards compliant implementation.[27]

3. Organizational structure and decision-making. The same bureaucratic forces that shape development and postural choices also shape doctrine and are likely to shape decisions to use (or not use) a nuclear weapon.[28] In moments of crisis, decisions regarding nuclear use are likely to be mediated not solely through strategic logic but through the institutional filters and leadership preferences embedded in each state's command and control system.[29] Of course, the differing strategic needs of China and Russia contribute to the shape of these organizational structures, resulting in a back-and-forth where strategy shapes organization and organization informs operational decision-making within the confines of such strategy.

In both Russia and China, final launch authority lies with political leadership: Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. In Russia, the three Cheget nuclear briefcases and the command

Below
Models of different rockets on display by China's Aerospace and Science Industry Corporation. They lead the country's research and development in nuclear technology. Photo by MisledD, Shutterstock

authority they represent are carried by the President, the Defence Minister and the Chief of the General Staff. This triplicate approach introduces a level of interdependence as a hedge against decapitating strikes, but in practice, the president's decision is preeminent. This structure reflects a legacy of Soviet-era civil-military relations, where a strong professional military bureaucracy plays a key role in executing political decisions.[30]

In the Chinese case, nuclear weapons nominally remain under party control — a notable distinction. As with postural and procurement decisions, the decision to use nuclear weapons would likely occur in the CMC chaired by the General Secretary of the Communist Party (currently Xi Jinping). The commission oversees the PLARF. Unlike Russia's more blended civil-military structure, this approach reenforces political control over the military by the party.[31] While specifics of a nuclear crisis and existing doctrine are likely to be the dominant factors in Chinese and Russian nuclear behaviour in a crisis, it is possible that the Russian organizational structure might predispose it towards faster decision-making and greater flexibility in delegation of authority even under similar strategic conditions.

4. Doctrine and force structure. Both Russia and the PRC have taken steps to change their nuclear force structure and doctrine documents in recent years. These changes occurred in response to geopolitical dynamics but also service domestic considerations of prestige building and increasing leadership approval. Deviating from modus of periodic engagement in cooperative trust-building measures such as non-proliferation and arms reduction treaties from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the 2010s, Russian nuclear policy reversal reached a conspicuous turning point with its "suspension" of the New START treaty in 2023, one year after launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Late in 2024, Russia published an updated nuclear doctrine, aiming to signal stronger nuclear resolve. The new doctrine significantly lowers the threshold for a Russian nuclear weapons use in comparison to the previous version from 2020.

Where before nuclear weapons were to be used to ward off an existential threat to the state, now "critical threat[s] to [Russia's] sovereignty and/or territorial integrity,"[32] including conventional attacks, can be considered sufficient conditions for nuclear use. "Sovereignty" is maintained as a vague term, encompassing ambiguous geographical boundaries, incorporating Belarusian territory while simultaneously remaining unclear about the status of occupied Ukrainian territories. Stated threats to Russian sovereignty also include crossing of political red lines related to foreign interference in domestic Russian affairs, expansions of military coalitions towards or large-scale exercises near the Russian borderland, as well as blockages of transportation routes and attacks on hazardous sites within Russia.

The updated doctrine furthermore opens the possibility for nuclear weapons to be used as retaliation for the use of weapons of mass destruction against Russian military forces abroad and allows for launch-on-warning in cases of verified large-scale strike attempts to decapitate Russian leadership. Additionally, the updated doctrine states that nuclear use may be triggered in cases of "aggression against Russia and/or its allies by any non-nuclear state with participation or support from a nuclear state [, which] will now be considered a joint attack."[33]

In contrast, the PRC's nuclear doctrine appears more restrained, nominally reserving nuclear weapons use for retaliation against nuclear attacks.[34] As discussed above, official Chinese positions maintain the claim that the goal of its nuclear build-up is the credibility of a second strike. However, observers suspect that the Chinese ambition is to reach factual nuclear parity with the United States, which would equip the PRC with capabilities way beyond certain retaliation.[35] To what extent the declared Chinese no-first use policy will be upheld in a high-stakes conflict remains uncertain under fictitious conditions and within available information. Nevertheless, the value of this commitment should not be underestimated in diplomatic fora and security considerations in the West.

Conclusion

While the Chinese nuclear arsenal may grow in scale and diversity, significant differences in historical experiences, strategic contexts, political dynamics, and organizational structures will likely continue to foster nuclear behaviours distinct from Russia's.

These fundamental differences underscore that even a partial convergence in nuclear capabilities does not necessarily equate to similarity in strategic behaviour, doctrine, or crisis decision-making.

It is essential, therefore, to carefully distinguish between Chinese and Russian nuclear contexts and apply Cold War-era insights with caution. Recognizing and responding to these differences is crucial for effective deterrence, escalation management, and future arms control dialogues in an increasingly complex nuclear landscape. ✧

Below
Go and chess are similar-looking strategy games, but factually they are very different, just like the different Chinese and Russian nuclear strategies identified in this article.

"It is essential to carefully distinguish between Chinese and Russian nuclear contexts and apply Cold War-era insights with caution."

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