

China's furtive underwater nuclear weapons test the Pentagon

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The Belt and Road Initiative is aimed at bolstering Beijing's economic and political reach. (Reuters)

Hong Kong: China is making significant advances toward achieving a more reliable second-strike nuclear capability, bolstering its deterrence against an attack on its land-based nuclear weapons, Reuters reveals today in a special report. Until recently, China lacked a powerful second-strike option. But now its ballistic missile submarines, which can deliver nuclear weapons capable of striking the United States, are changing that.

Evidence of China's progress can be found in satellite imagery reviewed by Reuters. These images show the presence of nuclear-powered, ballistic missile submarines at a strategic base in southern China. They also reveal facilities at the base that appear to have been built for the storing and loading of ballistic missiles. Off China's shores, warships and aircraft designed to protect submarines can now be spotted conducting regular patrols. And the man now commanding Chinese forces in the south is a veteran submariner.

Together, this points to China having a fleet of nuclear-armed submarines that appear to be heading out on regular patrols, serving and retired naval officers, diplomats and security analysts told Reuters. That signals a significant boost to Beijing's nuclear deterrence and marks a breakthrough in China's drive to rival the United States and Russia as a nuclear arms power.

The special report is part of "The China Challenge," a Reuters series on how Chinese leader Xi Jinping's ambitious revamping of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), China's military, is challenging U.S. dominance in Asia.

For six decades it has been a Chinese ambition to build a fleet of nuclear-armed submarines. In its report on the PLA last August, the Pentagon said that Beijing now possesses a "credible" and "viable" sea-based nuclear deterrent.

It is still unclear if China's nuclear-armed submarines are able to conduct permanent patrols, which would require at least one of these subs to always be at sea to ensure round-the-clock deterrence. Nevertheless, Western military officials have told Reuters that the United States and its allies are behaving as if China does have this capability and are now trying to track these submarines in a cat-and-mouse contest beneath the waves that is reminiscent of the Cold War.

As one Western military attaché told Reuters: "We're looking at them looking for us."

China's Ministry of National Defense, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the Pentagon did not respond to questions from Reuters.

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