

China has expanded its nuclear force: Pentagon

Beijing Has Added 100 Nuclear Warheads Since Last Year, Bringing Its Stockpile To Over 600, Says Report

Chris Buckley and John Ismay

China's nuclear arsenal and other elements of its armed forces have grown robustly despite anti-corruption investigations that have shaken the People's Liberation Army at its highest levels, the Pentagon said Wednesday.

China's navy "continues to develop into a global force, gradually extending its operational reach beyond East Asia," the defence department said in an annual report assessing Beijing's military strength. It said China also seemed to be exploring production of conventionally armed intercontinental ballistic missiles, which would give it another option — alongside its 135 or so nuclear long-range missiles — that could be used to threaten the US.

China doesn't disclose how many nuclear weapons it has. The Pentagon report estimates that it has added about 100 nuclear warheads since last year, bringing its stockpile to more than 600 by mid-2024. That is still much smaller than the arsenals of the US and Russia, but China appears to be on track to deploy over 1,000 warheads by 2030, the report said. Russia and the US each deploy 1,550 strategic N-weapons under a treaty that could expire in 2026.

The Pentagon report may feed into calls for the incoming



It said China also seemed to be exploring production of conventionally armed ICBM, which would give it another option — alongside its 135 or so nuclear long-range missiles — that could be used to threaten the US

Trump administration to focus on China's rising military strength, even as the US grapples with Russia's war in Ukraine and turmoil in West Asia.

The Pentagon said China seemed to have finished constructing three missile fields with 320 launch silos in its northern deserts and had placed missiles in some of the silos. It said China's rocket force was building dozens more silos to house Dongfeng-5 intercontinental missiles, each of which can rain multiple warheads.

The advances reported by the Pentagon came despite recent corruption scandals in the Chinese military. In June, party leaders officially accused two recent Chinese defence ministers — Gen. Li Shangfu and Gen. Wei Fenghe — of ta-

king bribes and selling military promotions. Last year, Xi abruptly replaced two commanders of the PLA's Rocket Force, which controls nearly all of China's nuclear missiles.

Some of the graft may've involved the silos built for missiles, but any issues with compromised silos have probably been addressed, the report said. It did not say how US officials reached those conclusions.

Much of China's military planning is focused on Taiwan. Beijing has long said that they want to peacefully absorb Taiwan into China, but it also says that it may resort to war. But the report concluded that China remains some distance from being able to confidently consider invading, citing its urban warfare shortcomings. NYT

Before Trump 2.0 kicks in, Biden admin announces measures to modernise H-1B

Flexibility In Defining Eligible Occupations But Stricter Site-Visit Verification Norms

Lubna Kably | TNN

The Biden administration on Tuesday night introduced some last-minute measures to modernise the H-1B programme. The final rules redefine specialty occupation criteria, provide benefits like deferring to prior adjudications, and enhance integrity measures such as rigorous site visit protocols.

The rules are set to take effect from Jan 17, 2025 — three days before the Trump administration takes over, making immigration experts uncertain about its longevity.

The first rule redefines specialty occupation, offering more flexibility to employers. It clarifies that an occupation 'normally' requiring a bachelor's degree does not mean that it must 'always' require a bachelor's degree. It says that a position may qualify as a specialty occupation (a mandatory eligibility criterion) even if the employer accepts a range of qualifying degree fields, as long as there is a 'logical connection' between the degree and job duties. For instance, degrees in quantitative maths could suffice for roles in AI, provided employers justify

LAST-MINUTE CHANGES

1 Revises definition of a specialty occupation | There must be a logical connection between educational degree and job requirement

2 Third party placement | The requirement of the client will determine whether the job is a specialty occupation eligible for H-1B visa

3 Deference rule | USCIS will defer to prior approvals if facts remain the same, say while processing an application for H-1B visa extension



4 Site visits | More stringency, site visits can be conducted at any location where the H-1B worker works, has worked or will work

5 Bonafide H-1B employment | While detailed itineraries of the H-1B workers will not be sought, evidence such as contracts may need to be provided

their relevance. Cyrus D Mehta, immigration attorney told TOI, "The need to show only a logical connection between the degree and duties rather than an 'exact correspondence' should resolve several concerns."

IT service and consultancy companies, which typically depute their H-1B workers to client sites, will also need to take into cognisance the new rule. Mitch Wexler, partner at global immigration law firm Fragomen, said: "The regulation provides that when a H-1B worker is 'staffed' to a third party, the requirements of that third party (client), and not the

petitioner (sponsoring employer), would be considered most relevant when determining whether the position is a qualifying specialty occupation."

Regulatory changes are crucial for the Indian diaspora too. According to TOI's analysis, in FY 2023 (ended Sept 30, 2023), Indians were allotted 68,825 initial employment visas which was nearly 58% of the total allotment. Visa extensions were approved for 2.1 lakh Indians (79%) of the total extensions approved by USCIS.

In the second rule, deference to prior adjudications has been reinstated and codified.

Greg Siskind, immigration attorney, said: "I am extremely happy that the DHS has finally put in the regulations that they will defer to earlier determinations on issues like whether a job is a specialty occupation or a worker has demonstrated they have suitable qualifications for the position. Given many H-1B workers are waiting years and years for their green cards, the risk that an immigration officer could overturn an earlier decision despite no evidence of fraud or misrepresentation was daunting."

And finally, the formalisation of the Fraud Detection and National Security site visit programme represents another cornerstone of the new rules. Rajiv S Khanna, managing attorney at Immigration.com said, "The regulations create a three-pronged framework of scrutiny: enhanced site inspections that can occur anywhere H-1B workers are placed, comprehensive documentation requirements for the entire contractual chain between staffing companies and end clients, and a redefinition of how USCIS will evaluate specialty occupation requirements for staff placement at third-party work sites." As regards proving that a bona fide job exists, while the itinerary requirement for H-1B workers is eliminated, sponsors must establish that positions are legitimate and meet all specialty occupation criteria.

Uzbek man confessed to killing Gen on orders of Ukraine's SBU: Russia

Moscow: Russia said on Wednesday it had detained an Uzbek man who had confessed to planting and detonating a bomb which killed a top general, Igor Kirillov, in Moscow on the instructions of Ukraine's SBU security service.

Kirillov, who was chief of Russia's Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Troops, was killed outside his apartment building on Tuesday along with his assistant when a bomb attached to an electric scooter went off. Ukraine's SBU intelligence service took responsibility for the killing after Ukraine accused Kirillov of being responsible for the use of chemical weapons against Ukrainian troops — something Moscow denies.

Russia's Investigative Committee said in a statement on Wednesday that the unnamed



Moscow said it will raise the killing of Lt-Gen Kirillov at UNSC on Dec 20

suspect had told them he had come to Moscow to carry out an assignment for Ukraine's intelligence services. In a video published by the Baza news outlet, which is known to have sources in Russian law-enforcement circles, the suspect is seen sitting in a van describing his actions. It was not clear under what conditions he was speaking and Reuters could not immediately verify the video's authenticity.

Dressed in a winter coat, the suspect is shown saying he

had come to Moscow, bought an electric scooter, and received an improvised explosive device. He describes placing the device on the electric scooter and parking it outside the apartment block where Kirillov lived. Investigators cited him as saying he set up a surveillance camera in a hire car which, they said, was watched in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro by people who organised the killing. The suspect, who is thought to be 29, is shown saying he remotely detonated the device when Kirillov left the building. He says Ukraine had offered him \$100,000 and residency in a European country.

Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for Russia's foreign ministry, said Moscow would raise the assassination at the United Nations Security Council on Dec 20. REUTERS

India, China agree on peace roadmap, 6-point consensus to boost ties

New Delhi: India and China took a significant step forward towards further normalisation of ties as their Special Representatives (SRs), NSA Ajit Doval and foreign minister Wang Yi, held talks for the first time in five years under the SR format and, according to an Indian readout, positively affirmed the implementation of the Oct 21 disengagement agreement, resulting in patrolling and grazing in "relevant areas", reports Sachin Parashar.

They discussed ways to ensure peace on the ground so that border issues don't hold back "normal development" of bilateral ties. The two sides also reached a six-point consensus that included resumption of Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage in Xizang (Tibet).

► Continued on P 16

China hasn't eased LAC build-up: US

New Delhi: China has not scaled down its huge military presence along the LAC with India since the Galwan Valley clash in June 2020, US department of defence said on Wednesday, adding PLA remains focused on developing capabilities to dissuade, deter or defeat any third-party intervention in the entire Indo-Pacific region, reports Rajat Pandit. "PLA has not drawn down its positions or troop numbers since the 2020 clash and has built infrastructure and support facilities to maintain multiple brigade deployments along the LAC," said Pentagon annual report on China's military capabilities.

► Continued on P 16

Survey ship INS Nirdeshak inducted into navy in Vizag

New Delhi: The Navy commissioned its latest survey ship INS Nirdeshak, which is equipped with state-of-the-art hydrographic and oceanographic survey equipment, at the naval dockyard in Visakhapatnam on Wednesday.

The 110-metre-long ship, with a displacement of 3,800 tonnes, was commissioned in the presence of junior defence minister Sanjay Seth and Eastern Naval Command chief Vice Admiral Rajesh Pendharkar.

INS Nirdeshak, which has an indigenous content of over 80%, is the second of the four such large survey vessels being built at GRSE in Kolkata under a Rs 2,435 crore contract, inked in Oct 2018. The first ship, INS Sandhayak, was commissioned in Feb this year.

Seth said such highly specialised ships play a vital role in charting the oceans, while also acting as credible maritime diplomacy tools by undertaking missions for friendly countries.

The Navy said INS Nirdeshak will "contribute significantly to security and environmental health" of the Indian Ocean Region as well as strengthen India's leadership in regional collaboration, scientific exploration, and peacekeeping missions.

With an endurance of over 25 days at sea and a top speed exceeding 18 knots, the ship will strengthen the SAGAR (security and growth for all in the region) initiative by promoting shared maritime data with friendly foreign countries. TNN

Doval & Wang provide 'positive directions' to boost bilateral ties

► Continued from P 1

The two sides, according to Beijing, agreed on a "step by step" roadmap, which would entail addressing the easy issues first before moving on to those more contentious, for taking the relationship forward.

Chinese ambassador Xu Feihong said the two sides, that met in Beijing, reached the six-point consensus that included resumption of Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage in Xizang (Tibet), cross-border river cooperation and trade at the Nathu La Pass. China described the "hard-won" talks as constructive, with Wang saying the SR engagement was an important and timely step towards the implementation of the consensus reached by PM Modi and President Xi Jinping in Kazan (Russia) in Oct.

Indian govt said Doval and Wang also provided "positive directions" for cross-border cooperation and exchanges including resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, data sharing on trans-border rivers and border trade.



NSA Ajit Doval with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in Beijing on Wednesday

Indian govt said Wang and Doval reiterated the importance of maintaining a "political perspective" of the overall bilateral relationship, while seeking a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable framework for settlement of the boundary question. They resolved to inject more "vitality" into this process. "They agreed on the salience of stable, predictable and amicable India-China relations for regional and global peace and prosperity," said govt.

Doval and Wang also underlined the importance of maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas to

promote overall development of the India-China bilateral relationship, according to the Indian side.

The SR engagement, which last took place in Dec 2019, followed the Oct thaw that saw India and China completing the disengagement process at the remaining friction points — Depsang and Demchok — in eastern Ladakh. This was also the first high-level visit from India to China since the eastern Ladakh border standoff that started in May 2020.

"Drawing on the learnings from the events of 2020, they discussed various measures to maintain peace and tranquillity on the border and advance effective border management. They decided to use, coordinate and guide the relevant diplomatic and military mechanisms towards this purpose," said the Indian readout. India has said that after disengagement, it's going to focus on de-escalation and effective management of border activities. Doval also called on Chinese Vice President Han Zheng and invited Wang to India for another round of SR talks.