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China To Send Nuke Armed Submarines To Pacific To Counter U.S., Beijing Claims

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A Chinese Navy submarine takes part in an international fleet review to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army Navy in Qingdao, Shandong province April 23, 2009.

Just as most Americans settle in for a nice three-day Memorial Day weekend, news broke that China is planning to send submarines armed with nuclear missiles in the Pacific Ocean for the first time. The UK-based *The Guardian* newspaper, citing Chinese officials, reported on May 27.

According to the report, Beijing is claiming that U.S. weapons systems have become so advanced and so undermine China's existing deterrent force that Beijing has little choice but to send in the submarines armed with nukes.

Beijing claims that U.S. plans disclosed in March to station the Thaad anti-ballistic system in South Korea, and the development of hypersonic glide missiles potentially capable of hitting China less than an hour after launch, as huge threats to the effectiveness of its land-based deterrent force.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon's latest annual report to Congress released less than two weeks ago predicted that China will probably conduct its first nuclear deterrence patrol sometime this year.

The Guardian report said that warheads and missiles would be put together and handed over to the Chinese navy, allowing a nuclear weapon to be launched much faster if such a decision was taken, while the start of Chinese missile patrols could further destabilize the already tense strategic standoff with the U.S. in the South China Sea.

However, other reports seem to debunk the ability of Chinese to implement this plan, at least at the current time. A report by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), an organization that provides science-based analysis of and solutions to protect against catastrophic threats to national and international security, stated that "it seems that various news media reports and official statement continue to exaggerate or preempt the operational capability of the Chinese submarine force."

"Many have said the new Jin-class SSBNs had begun conducting deterrent patrols, but the DOD [Department of Defense] report seems to indicate that the subs (or rather, their missiles) are not yet fully operational."

Questionable timing

One can't help but question the timing of the Chinese submarine report, released just days after President Obama's landmark visit to Vietnam and his decision to lift the decades old arms embargo against Vietnam and allow sales of military weapons technology. Though Obama said that his move was not aimed at China, most think otherwise. As soon as Obama made the announcement, Beijing fired back with harsh criticism over the announcement.

"Obama claimed that this move is not aimed at China, yet this is only a very poor lie which reveals the truth - exacerbating the strategic antagonism between Washington and Beijing," the Beijing-based *Global Times* said. The *Global Times* often expresses the views of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

While there is little doubt among analysts that China will in time arm its submarines with nuclear weapons, it must also be noted that Chinese military officials and state-controlled media, have to learned to master the fine art of the *spin* – in essence they drum up domestic support at home, feeding into nationalism as well as releasing news in efforts to micro-manage China's global image.

At times, this news has actually downplayed China's military preparedness, but more often that not it gives a stronger image of China's military than is supported by the facts. Often op-ed articles and opinion pieces in Chinese media are written by military officials.

Nonetheless, the arming of Chinese submarines with nuclear missiles and multiple warheads would up the ante once again in the hotly contested South China Sea where China has overlapping claims with the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei, albeit in a sea that sees over \$5 trillion in trade pass through it each year, including vital oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments to Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – all U.S. allies. Japan and South Korea are the world's number one and number two LNG importers, respectively. Around two-thirds of all LNG demand comes from the Asia-Pacific region.



China claims more than 80% of the South China Sea, an historically unprecedented claim. The U.S. in the name of freedom of navigation is challenging these claims with both naval voyages and military flights nearby Beijing's claims in the disputed waterway.

The South China Sea is already becoming one of the most hotly contested waterways in the world, and a potential military flash point between not only the U.S. and China, but among rival claimants and China as well.

Moreover, while *The Guardian* may have allowed itself to be used by China to spread Beijing's own message, the fact remains that when China does indeed arms its subs with nukes, the Pacific will become even more dangerous as all sides counter each other's moves. This is the backdrop that will frame the Asia-Pacific region for the next several decades if not longer, and miscalculation by Washington will give Beijing an advantage that the U.S. will not be able to wrest away for years, if ever.