

# Congress of the United States

## Washington, DC 20515

November 4, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

We write to urge you to make nuclear weapons risk reduction a top priority for discussion at your upcoming virtual meeting with the leader of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping. China's launch of an "orbital bombardment system," along with other nuclear modernization efforts, suggests it may seek a greater military role for its nuclear weapons. We fear that the current climate of distrust and uncertainty over recent developments in China's nuclear weapons program may lead both the United States and China to engage in worst-case military planning. That could fuel an arms race that we cannot afford and should seek to avoid.

We applaud your Administration's efforts to seek cooperation with Beijing on the existential threats posed by the climate crisis. We hope that you will extend those conversations to include seeking cooperation on the existential threat of nuclear weapons. At your upcoming virtual bilateral meeting with Xi, we ask that you propose practical steps to reduce nuclear weapons risks with China. The nuclear weapons stockpiles of both the United States and Russia are several times size of China, even with the latest Department of Defense projection that China could have 1,000 "deliverable" nuclear weapons by the end of the decade.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, China's latest test of a hypersonic glide weapon, its reported construction of 250 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) silos<sup>2</sup>, and its refusal to date to engage in nuclear risk reduction talks, are a mounting national security concern.

We welcome Secretary of State Antony Blinken's efforts to raise the issue of China's nuclear weapons modernization with ASEAN leaders, as a tit-for-tat arms build-up in the region is most likely to impact their security.<sup>3</sup> The Department of State and the Department of Defense must be prepared to hold talks with their Chinese counterparts if Beijing agrees to engage on strategic issues. With nearly one quarter<sup>4</sup> of the State Department's Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance full-time staff lost during the Trump administration, we ask that you work with Congress to ensure you have the funding and hiring authorities needed to engage experts who can advance U.S. objectives in negotiations with China. As your Administration actively considers arms control proposals in consultation with our allies and partners, we urge you to

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<sup>1</sup> Courtney Kube, *China has upped nuke production, it worried U.S. would start war before 2020 election, report says*, NBC News (Nov. 3, 2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/china-has-upped-nuke-production-worried-u-s-would-start-n1283096>

<sup>2</sup> Matt Korda and Hans Kristensen, *China Is Building A Second Nuclear Missile Silo Field*, Federation of American Scientists (Jul. 26, 2021), <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2021/07/china-is-building-a-second-nuclear-missile-silo-field/>

<sup>3</sup> Peter Martin, *Blinken Warns Asian Nations of China's Growing Nuclear Ambitions*, Bloomberg (Aug. 6, 2021), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-06/blinken-warns-asian-nations-of-china-s-growing-nuclear-ambitions>

<sup>4</sup> Mallory Stewart, *Returned Questions for the Record*, Committee on Senate Foreign Relations (Oct. 5, 2021).

consider taking the following steps to enhance our mutual security:

1. **Invite China, and other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, to observe a United States-Russia New START Treaty on-site inspection.** Since 2011, the United States and Russia have conducted a collective 328 on-site inspections under the New START Treaty, and have cooperated on thousands of data exchanges related to the location, movement, and disposition of their respective strategic nuclear forces.<sup>5</sup> China, whose nuclear doctrine is marked by its opaqueness, could benefit from observing the U.S.-Russia model of binding, verifiable limits on their strategic forces, as well as how to manage access to sensitive facilities.
2. **Seek negotiations toward a treaty or agreement that stops the additional production of fissile material.** In line with its de-carbonization efforts, China is building fast breeder nuclear reactors and reprocessing reactors that pose a proliferation risk if material is diverted from civilian uses to weapons production.<sup>6</sup> Although China has resisted efforts to negotiate a legally binding Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) in the Conference on Disarmament, an agreement that requires mutual disclosure of stocks of fissile material, or more ambitiously, a freeze on further production, would be a positive step forward.
3. **Seek an agreement with China that allows for advance notifications of ballistic missile launches, through the Hague Code of Conduct.** China remains a non-party to this key transparency and confidence-building measure that calls upon its signatories to provide a pre-launch notification of ballistic and space-launched vehicles as well as an annual disclosure on those launches. By subscribing to the Hague Code of Conduct and sharing pre-launch notifications, China would have the opportunity to back its dubious claim that it tested a peaceful “space vehicle”<sup>7</sup> last August, not an orbital bombardment system, as was widely reported.
4. **Seek an agreement not to target or interfere in nuclear command, control, and communications (commonly referred to as “NC3”) infrastructure.** Cyber-attacks on U.S. critical infrastructure by state and non-state actors demonstrate the lack of enforceable rules governing the cyber domain. The United States and former Soviet Union agreed to not to target the nuclear command and control systems of the other party for fear that such an action could be perceived as a prelude to a massive, decapitating nuclear strike. The United States, China, and potentially other countries, should mutually agree that kinetic or non-kinetic attacks that blind NC3 infrastructure must be off the table.

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<sup>5</sup> Fact Sheet, New START Treaty Inspection Activities, U.S. Department of State (2021), <https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-inspection-activities/>

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Gardner, *China reactors will yield weapons-grade plutonium -U.S. commander*, Reuters (Apr. 12, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-china-nuclear-plutonium/update-1-china-reactors-will-yield-weapons-grade-plutonium-u-s-commander-idUSL1N2ME1U8>.

<sup>7</sup> *China Says ‘Hypersonic’ Object Put Into Orbit Was Space Vehicle*, Bloomberg News (Oct. 18, 2021), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-18/china-says-hypersonic-object-put-into-orbit-was-space-vehicle>

5. **Seek an agreement on transparency measures or verifiable limits, or both, on hypersonic cruise missiles and glide vehicles that are mounted on ballistic missiles.** Although hypersonic glide vehicles, such as the one China tested, travel at velocities comparable to ICBMs, their non-traditional flight paths could make them more difficult for early warning satellites to detect, reducing decision time in a crisis. A top U.S. military official assessed that countries' development of novel hypersonic nuclear systems is due to the exaggerated capabilities of U.S. missile defenses to intercept their strategic forces.<sup>8</sup> Your meeting with Xi and your forthcoming Missile Defense Review can make clear that no current or planned U.S. missile defense system will seek to alter the deterrence value of mutual vulnerability from strategic nuclear weapons.

These steps will reduce the risk of a nuclear conflict with China, but won't eliminate it. We urge your Administration, in its Integrated National Defense Strategy, to prioritize restraint and to work with allies and partners to call on China to maintain its minimum deterrent posture. China's test of an orbital bombardment system is only a "Sputnik moment" if we let it result in a new arms race. Through your leadership and diplomacy we can ensure that does not happen.

Sincerely,



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Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator  
Co-Chair, NWAC Working Group



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John Garamendi  
Member of Congress  
Co-Chair, NWAC Working Group



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Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator  
Co-Chair, NWAC Working Group



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Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
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<sup>8</sup> *Statement of General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, United States Air Force Commander, United States Northern Command, Hearing Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong. (Feb. 13, 2020), [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/OShaughnessy\\_02-13-20.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/OShaughnessy_02-13-20.pdf)*