

Table 1: Chinese nuclear forces, 2020

By Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda

Type	NATO designation	Number of launchers ¹	Year deployed	Range (kilometers)	Warheads x yield ² (kilotons)	Warheads
Land-based ballistic missiles						
DF-4	CSS-3	6 ³	1980	5,500	1 x 3,300	6
DF-5A	CSS-4 Mod 2	10	1981	12,000	1 x 4,000–5,000	10
DF-5B	CSS-4 Mod 3	10	2015	13,000	5 x 200–300	50
DF-5C	(CSS-4 Mod 4)	..	(2020)	13,000	(MIRV)	..
DF-15	CSS-6	..	1990	600	1 x ? ⁴	..
DF-17	?	(18) ⁵	(2021)	1,800+	1 x HGV ⁶	..
DF-21A/E	CSS-5 Mods 2, 6	40	2000, 2016	2,100+ ⁷	1 x 200–300	40 ⁸
DF-26	?	100 ⁹	2016	4,000	1 x 200–300	20 ¹⁰
DF-31	CSS-10 Mod 1	6	2006	7,200	1 x 200–300	6
DF-31A	CSS-10 Mod 2	36	2007	11,200	1 x 200–300	36
DF-31AG	CSS-10 Mod 2 ¹¹	36	2018	11,200	1 x 200–300	36
DF-41	CSS-X-20	(18) ¹²	(2021)	12,000	(3 x 200–300)	(54)
<i>Subtotal:</i>		<i>244 (280)</i>				<i>204 (258)</i>
Submarine-launched ballistic missiles						
JL-2	CSS-N-14	4/48 (2/24) ¹³	2016 (2021)	7,000+ 7,000+	1 x 200–300 1 x 200–300	48 (24)
Aircraft¹⁴						
H-6 ¹⁵	B-6	20	1965/2009	3,100+	1 x bomb (1 x ALBM)	20 n.a.
Total		312 (372)				272 (350)¹⁶

¹ Numbers in parenthesis indicate weapons in the process of entering service but not yet operational.

² The Chinese nuclear testing program demonstrated a wide range of warhead yields. While older and less accurate missiles were equipped with megaton-yield warheads, new and more accurate missiles carry warheads with much lower yields, possibly in the low hundreds of kilotons. It is possible that some warheads have even lower yield options.

³ The 2020 US Defense Department report still lists the old liquid-fuel DF-4. But with the fielding of greater numbers of solid-fuel DF-31AG and DF-26 missiles, it is possible that the DF-4 is in the process of being retired, if it hasn't already happened.

⁴ The CIA concluded in 1993 that China “almost certainly” had developed a warhead for the DF-15, but it is unclear whether the capability was fielded.

⁵ Eighteen DF-17 launchers participated in the 2019 Beijing parade but only 16 were showed.

⁶ The DF-17 was presented as a conventional missile at the 2019 Beijing parade, but US Strategic Command has recently asserted the weapon is nuclear-capable. We're awaiting more information before attributing warheads to the DF-17.

⁷ US Defense Department lists the range of the DF-21A/E as 1,750 km, but US Air Force has reported it as 2,150 km.

⁸ This table only counts nuclear versions DF-21A (CSS-5 Mod 2) and DF-21E (CSS-5 Mod 6), of which fewer than 50 launchers are deployed. It assumes each nuclear launcher does not have reload. Conventional versions (DF-21C and DF-21D) are assumed to have one reload.

⁹ US Defense Department lists 200 DF-26, which appears to be a typo. INDO-PACOM counts about 100, which matches base infrastructure better.

¹⁰ This assumes most dual-capable DF-26s have conventional missions and only a limited number have a nuclear mission. It assumes reload for conventional missile only.

¹¹ The DF-31AG is thought to carry the same missile as the DF-31A.

¹² Eighteen DF-41 launchers operated in the PLA Rocket Force training area near Jilantai in Spring of 2019 and participated in the October 2019 Beijing parade (though only 16 were showed). The launchers were said to come from two brigades, one of which might be approaching operational capability. Additional launchers are in production.

¹³ Two more Jin-class (Type 094) SSBNs are fitting out, for a future total of 72 launchers.

¹⁴ Bombers were used to conduct at least 12 of China's nuclear test explosions between 1965 and 1979 and gravity bomb models are displayed in museums. The PLA Air Force nuclear capability was dormant for years but the mission has recently been re-established.

¹⁵ The PLA Air Force has recently been reassigned a nuclear mission. US Department of Defense lists the H-6 as nuclear and says development of an air-launched ballistic missile with a possible nuclear warhead option is underway.

¹⁶ US Defense Department says the "operational" stockpile is in the low-200s. Based on available launchers, we estimate the total stockpile is larger, possibly around 270 warheads. In addition, another 78 warheads are assumed to have been produced or under production for weapons in the process of being fielded—including DF-41 ICBMs and two additional SSBNs—for a total stockpile of approximately 350 warheads.