STRATCOM Chief: China's Nuclear Buildup a 'Strategic Breakout' Requiring U.S. Strategic Rethinking

U.S. Navy Adm. Charles A. Richard, commander of U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), provides remarks during the 24th annual Space and Missile Defense Symposium at the Von Braun Center in Huntsville, Alabama, Aug. 12. *U.S. NAVY / Capt. Ron Flanders*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The Chinese government's rapid military buildup across all domains is a "strategic breakout" from its minimum deterrent nuclear posture to one that can coerce other nations, the commander of U.S. strategic forces warned Aug. 25.

Rapid expansion of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) silos, road mobile ICBMs, six or more Jin-Class ballistic missile submarines carrying nuclear weapons that can reach the continental United States from the South China Sea, and bombers armed with air-launched ballistic missiles have given China a "true triad" of sea, air and land nuclear capability, Adm. Charles Richard, head of U.S. Strategic Command said.

In a virtual conversation with Hudson Institute Senior Fellow Rebeccah L. Heinrichs, Richard said that amounted to a "final brick in the wall, a final piece of capability designed to build a military that is capable of coercion."

Given the changing threat environment, "right now is the ideal time" for Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's planned reviews of the national defense strategy, nuclear posture and missile defense, Richard said. "We have never before had two peer nuclear-capable opponents [Russia and China] that have to be deterred at the same time, [but] we have to deter

differently."

Russia remains the strategic and nuclear pacing threat "at least for a little bit longer," with over 2,000 non-treaty constrained warheads and novel capabilities like hypersonic weapons, Richard said.

The United States is developing its own hypersonic weapons. The Navy plans to first deploy Conventional Prompt Strike (CSP) capability hypersonic missiles on Zumwalt-class guided missile destroyers and later, Virginia-class Block 5 submarines. STRATCOM has both strategic deterrence and nuclear deterrence as missions.

"If we had this [hypersonic] capability, it would enable us to accomplish strategic deterrence better than what we can do using the nuclear effect alone," Richard said.

STRATCOM "will be ready to receive the first service hypersonic capability at intercontinental range the day they make it available," he said. "We are already working the concepts. I have the targeting. I have the command and control."

Analysts studying commercial satellite images in recent weeks have discovered the Chinese government is building two large fields of ballistic missile launching silos in the country's western desert, but U.S. officials including Richard, have not commented directly on the development.

The STRATCOM chief said it is not enough to plan around all the missiles, submarines and other weaponry the People's Liberation Army already has.

"It would not be a wise assumption to think somehow 'They're done,'" Richard said, explaining that officials should not lose sight of "What is the next thing we're going to find, and where does this end?"