



As Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, now-retired Air Force Gen. John E. Hyten briefs the media from the Pentagon Briefing Room, July 29, 2020. DOD photo by Marvin Lynchard.

## China's Expedited ICBM Program Has Been a Top US Secret, Shows Need for Speed, Hyten Says

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the Brookings Institution streamed Sept. 13. The pace of the program is his top concern, he said.

Hyten said he saw China's missile buildup underway when he was head of U.S. Strategic Command, from 2016 to 2019, but "it was in very classified channels and you couldn't talk about it." Now, ["commercial imagery" in the press](#) has unmasked the scale of China's program. Hyten did not say why knowledge of China's buildup was so closely guarded, but such secrecy usually has to do with the sources and methods of intelligence.

[Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr. said in August](#) the implications of China's missile program could be "catastrophic" if the Air Force doesn't change itself fast enough to keep pace with the threat. The revelations of the missile building campaign "helps to validate what we've been talking about, why we need" the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent missile, the B-21 bomber, and Long-Range Stand Off missile, Brown said.

China is building "hundreds and hundreds of fixed silos" to hold intercontinental ballistic missiles, Hyten told Brookings host Michael O'Hanlon, "and it seems like, every couple of weeks, more pictures are coming in of more silos, and by the way, there's no limits on what China can put in those silos."

The U.S. and Russia are [limited to 1,550 nuclear weapons under the New START treaty](#), Hyten said, but for China, ["there's no limit](#). They could put 10 re-entry vehicles on every one of those ICBMs if they wanted to—there's nothing to limit that ability," Hyten said.

Hyten compared "how fast they're building these silos" with "the GBSD program, saying, even "if everything goes right, we'll have 400 new silos with an initial operational capability in 2030, full operational capability [in] 2035. It's going to take us 10, 15 years to modernize 400 silos that already exist. China's building that many, basically, overnight." The "speed of that difference ... is what really concerns me the most." Given China's declaration of a "no first use" nuclear weapons policy, "You have to ask

yourself, why are they building that enormous, enormous nuclear capability, faster than anybody in the world?”

The 2018 National Defense Strategy “started moving us toward the challenge we’re going to face with China,” ending an uncertain period in which the U.S. effectively had no defense strategy. But “the downside is, we’re still moving unbelievably slow, unbelievably slow. We’re so bureaucratic and risk-averse,” Hyten lamented. Without a stated strategy of competing with peer nations, “you can have a risk-averse strategy and you can go slow. But when you have a competitor like China—and Russia—that can move fast, you have to be able to move fast, as well. And we still move way too slow.”

While Hyten said China is America’s pacing military threat, Russia “cannot be discounted.” He noted that Russia announced its nuclear modernization plan in 2006 and it has followed through on it, and the upgraded nuclear weapons “are not ... for Chechen rebels.” But China is a “very different competitor, because of the sheer size of their economy.”

He’s also concerned that the U.S. and China are “not talking to each other a lot,” even though they presumably have a common goal of avoiding all-out war.

The assumptions underlying the Joint Warfighting Concept are largely classified, Hyten said, and he declined to answer questions about America’s vulnerabilities and whether it’s stronger on defense or offense.

However, “We need to aggregate capabilities in order to integrate our fires. And we need to disaggregate our capabilities in order to survive and operate,” he said, adding, “We need to do that very quickly, in all domains, with all services at the same time.” Doing so will create a “huge problem” for America’s adversaries.

The services have been talking about “aggregating fires” through joint all-domain command and control, while “disaggregating capabilities” was a reference to dispersing U.S. military assets to compound the problem of targeting “large formations at fixed sites,” similar to the Air Force’s Agile Combat Employment operating concept. Massing forces at fixed locations

“is not good,” he observed.

He also said JADC2 is not simply about “protecting yourself,” but very much an offensive tool about “denying the adversary the same thing. So you have to put all those pieces together ... At the unclassified level, I’ll stop there.”

Among his top frustrations, Hyten said he issued a clarion call to create a resilient space architecture more than six years ago, when he was at Air Force Space Command. He complained that America’s satellites are “a bunch of fat, juicy targets” because so much depends on them for communications, navigation, and sensing.

“Space Force has developed the concepts of what this new architecture is going to be, but we have not moved on that path,” Hyten said. The “same challenges” that were in the budget 10 years ago “are the same challenges ... in the budget today,” he said.

However, “the good news is,” because of strong investment in military space, “we just have exquisite, enormous advantages over an adversary for the foreseeable future.” Whether that’s “five years or 10 years, I can’t tell you, but as fast as China is going, probably on the lesser side,” Hyten said.

When he was at STRATCOM, he did an analysis of the U.S. constellation’s vulnerability to kinetic attack, “And I became very, very confident that we could survive any threat that existed.” But now, given the pace of China’s modernization, it could “deny that,” he said.

The U.S. defense top line needs to grow at 3 percent to 5 percent real growth per year “if we keep doing business the way we have,” he said. However, if the U.S. military is allowed to divest systems that are no longer relevant—Hyten dislikes the term “legacy”—then a \$700 billion budget “should be enough” for “a pretty darn good defense.”

Doing business differently can be as simple as not spending months on continuing resolutions, when contractors are on the meter and work is not getting done because the flow of money and new starts has been interrupted, Hyten said.

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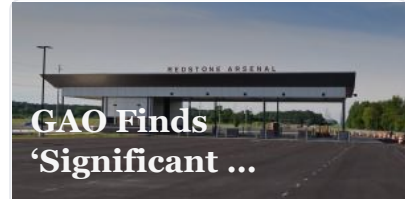
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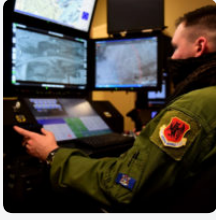
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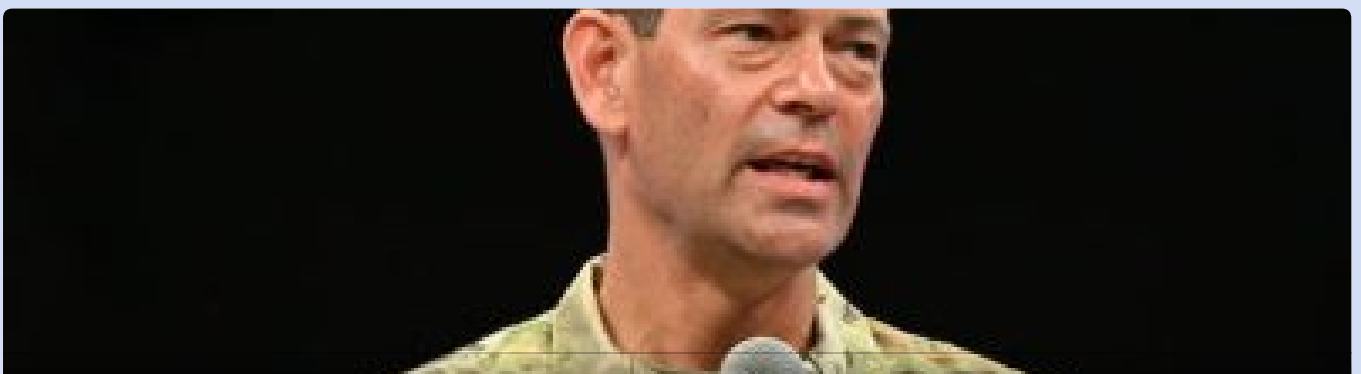
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