

The Truth about the Sino-Russian Combined Patrols

– China’s Nuclear Threat Perception and Its Response –

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1. Introduction

The Chinese People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has conducted nine “combined strategic aerial patrols” with the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) since 2019.¹ Until 2024, the areas where Chinese military aircraft flew during the combined patrols as well as the PLAAF units that participated in the patrols barely changed until 2024, but both these changed greatly in that year. This paper will examine the reason for these changes. First, by analyzing the combined patrols, it will be shown that a combined patrol in November 2024 was a clear nuclear threat against the USA. Next, two hypotheses about why China acted so unusually during the patrols of 2024 will be examined and compared. As a result, it will be concluded that the combined patrols were part of China’s effort to complete its nuclear deterrence capability, but it will be discovered that the information substantiating the hypothesis that China intended to send a political signal through the combined patrols is key to understanding China’s perception of the nuclear threat to itself.

2. Details of the Combined Patrols

A “strategic patrol” is a patrol by military aircraft or naval vessels that can employ strategic weapons within those weapons’ range in order to be able to immediately attack an enemy country with those weapons. A “strategic weapon” is a weapon that causes serious damage to an enemy country politically, economically, or militarily. “Strategic weapons” are generally understood to refer to nuclear weapons.

Before the PLAAF conducted strategic aerial patrols with the VKS, the VKS had been conducting such patrols for 12 years since it had recommenced them in 2007, having stopped conducting them with the end of the Cold War.² In July 2019 the PLAAF conducted the first

¹ China has actually conducted 14 patrols across 11 days, but China regards multiple patrols on the same day as well as patrols that were conducted over two consecutive days as one, so it only counts nine total combined patrols.

² Luke Harding and Ewen MacAskill, “Putin revives long-range bomber patrols,” *The Guardian*, August 17,

“combined strategic aerial patrol,” and until 2022 it conducted one such patrol per year. The areas where the patrols were conducted were primarily the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. From 2022 the PLAAF began conducting patrols twice per year, and until 2024 the areas where the patrols were conducted, as well as the PLAAF bomber units conducting them, hardly changed.



American and Canadian fighters escort a Chinese H-6K bomber in the airspace around Alaska in July 2024. (Source: NORAD)

However, in 2024 the combined patrols changed greatly. On July 24, 2024 (July 25 in China) two H-6K bombers of the PLAAF joined with two Tu-95 strategic bombers of the VKS to conduct a five-hour-long patrol near the U.S. state of Alaska.³ Both forces' aircraft took off from a Russian military base, flew from the Chukchi Sea to the Bering Sea, and then flew to the Pacific Ocean.⁴ While the patrol approached U.S. airspace, it never entered it.⁵ The patrolling bombers also did not carry weapons.⁶ This represented the first time that PLAAF aircraft participating in a combined patrol sortied from a foreign country as well as the first time that PLAAF aircraft approached U.S. territory.

Then on November 29 and 30, 2024, when the Chinese and Russian air forces again conducted combined patrols in the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, and the western Pacific Ocean, the PLAAF employed the H-6N for the first time.⁷ The H-6N is an improved version of the H-6K,

2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/18/russia.ewenmacaskill>.

³ North American Aerospace Defense Command Public Affairs, “NORAD detects, tracks and intercepts Russian and PRC aircraft operating in the Alaska ADIZ,” North American Aerospace Defense Command, July 24, 2024, <https://www.norad.mil/Newsroom/Press-Releases/Article/3849184/>; “Russian Aerospace forces, Chinese Air Force conduct joint air patrol,” TASS, July 25, 2024, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://tass.com/defense/1821093>; 刘济美、肖航：《中俄两军组织实施第8次联合空中战略巡航》，新华网，2024年7月25日，<http://www.news.cn/20240725/8211c605aba543f192791a92322d1b0e/c.html>.

⁴ “Russian Aerospace forces, Chinese Air Force conduct joint air patrol”; Lolita C. Baldor and Didi Tang, “Chinese and Russian bombers patrolling off Alaska raise concerns about growing military cooperation,” Associated Press, July 26, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/china-russia-us-military-planes-norad-alaska-4994b489e75ae636b4a4cd5bb40f91ac>.

⁵ North American Aerospace Defense Command Public Affairs, “NORAD detects, tracks and intercepts Russian and PRC aircraft operating in the Alaska ADIZ.”

⁶ North American Aerospace Defense Command Public Affairs, “NORAD detects, tracks and intercepts Russian and PRC aircraft operating in the Alaska ADIZ”; 《中俄第8次联合战略巡航现场视频》，新华网，2024年7月26日，<http://www.news.cn/milpro/20240726/91b75d8d578e4c63af5388c120799e16/c.html>.

⁷ It was determined that these were H-6N bombers using photographs that were released by the Joint Staff Office. 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2024年11月29日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2024/p20241129_01.pdf; 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕

and in addition to having a probe for aerial refueling on its nose, it has a recessed fuselage in order to be able to carry large air-launched ballistic missiles (ALBM). It is believed that the ALBM that the H-6N can carry ventrally is nuclear-capable.⁸ The H-6K can also launch an ALBM from its main wing,⁹ but at this time there exists no evidence that the ALBM that the H-6K can carry is nuclear-capable. Therefore, because the H-6N is regarded as a strategic bomber that is like the U.S. military's B-52 or the Russian military's Tu-95, it can be said that the PLAAF used a strategic bomber in the combined patrols for the first time in November 2024. At present the only unit in the PLAAF operating the H-6N is the 106th Brigade (based in Nanyang City, Henan Province), and this is believed to be the only unit in the PLAAF employing nuclear weapons.¹⁰ As far as can be determined from publicly available information, it is likely that with one exception, all the combined patrols until 2024 were conducted by the 28th Regiment of the 10th Division of the PLAAF, and even that one exception was conducted by the 29th Regiment of the same 10th Division (see reference "Sino-Russian Combined Strategic Aerial Patrols").¹¹ However, the 106th Brigade conducted the patrols of November 2024, so this represented the first time that a unit that is charged with nuclear strikes conducted patrols.

Actually, the significance of November's combined patrols does not end there. On the second day of patrols, November 30, the PLAAF for the first time formed a strike package and sent the strike package to the western Pacific Ocean.¹² There is much that is unknown about China's nuclear-capable ALBM, but it is speculated to have been developed on the basis of the DF-21 ballistic

僚監部、2024年11月30日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2024/p20241130_01.pdf.

⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (2024)," December 18, 2024, 105, <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>; U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (2021)," November 3, 2021, 56, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

⁹ Thomas Newdick, "China's H-6K Bomber Seen Firing Air-Launched Ballistic Missile for First Time," *The War Zone*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.twz.com/air/chinas-h-6k-bomber-seen-firing-air-launched-ballistic-missile-for-first-time>.

¹⁰ Roderick Lee, "China's Air Force Might Be Back in the Nuclear Business," *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/chinas-air-force-might-be-back-in-the-nuclear-business/>.

¹¹ The units to which the aircraft conducting the patrols belong was determined using photographs released by the Joint Staff Office, but because only a portion of the photographs of the aircraft participating in the combined patrols have been released, it cannot be said definitively that no other units' bombers participated. However, it is usual for small-scale operations involving two- to four-ship formations to be assigned by unit.

¹² From photographs that were released by the Joint Staff Office, it was determined that the strike package contained bombers, an intelligence collection aircraft, an electronic warfare aircraft, fighters, and a tanker. 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2024年11月30日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2024/p20241130_01.pdf; Thomas Newdick, "Our Best Look Yet at China's New Standoff Electronic Warfare Plane," *The War Zone*, August 30, 2024, <https://www.twz.com/air/our-best-look-yet-at-chinas-new-standoff-electronic-warfare-plane>.

missile,¹³ and because the range of the DF-21 is approximately 2,150 kilometers,¹⁴ the ALBM is likely to have an equivalent range. The patrol's flight path through the Miyako Strait connects directly with the western Pacific Ocean, and the PLAAF can put a massive U.S. Air Force base on Guam within range of that ALBM just from a point at which one of its H-6Ns entered the Pacific Ocean. The H-6N can, of course, carry conventional weapons, but judging from the fact that the 106th Brigade's primary mission is nuclear strike, it is likely that the combined patrol of November 30 also represents the first serious training to conduct a nuclear strike against Guam from the air. So, one can say that the combined patrol that has come closest to U.S. territory was the patrol near Alaska, but the combined patrol that has presented a clear and serious threat to U.S. territory was that of November 30.

3. The Political Signaling Hypothesis

Why did the combined patrols change so much in 2024? There are two possible answers to that question. First, there is the hypothesis that China wanted to send a political signal. Judging from their serial numbers 20013 and 20215, the PLAAF bombers that flew near Alaska belong to the 28th Regiment of the 10th Division of the PLAAF's Eastern Theater Air Force, and the 28th Regiment is a unit that is based over 6,000 kilometers from Alaska in Anqing City, Anhui Province.¹⁵ When the USA sent B-52 bombers to the South China Sea in June 2018, the Chinese Foreign Ministry criticized the USA, calling this action a threat.¹⁶ Therefore, China must have believed that sending a bomber from afar to another country would be regarded as a threat. Assuming that China decided to conduct the combined patrol near Alaska understanding and accepting this, then it is likely that it had a strategic purpose besides simple flight training.

In July 2024 China was indignant at the USA and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), so the hypothesis that China wanted to send a political signal to those countries is strong. In June 2024 China had already expressed its concern over the rapid development of the US-Japan alliance.¹⁷ From July 9 to 11 of the same year NATO held a leaders' summit in Washington, and in

¹³ Parth Satam, "China's H-6N Bomber Spotted with Air-Launched Ballistic Missile in Clearest Image Yet," *The Aviationist*, April 6, 2025, <https://theaviationist.com/2025/04/06/h-6n-albm-clearest-image/>.

¹⁴ "DF-21 (CSS-5)," *Missile Threat*, April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/df-21/>.

¹⁵ 军迷天下:《首次到达高纬度地区!中俄轰炸机编队飞越白令海 现场视频来了!》, YouTube, 2024年7月26日, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_79cufHm14; Kenneth W. Allen, "PLA Air Force: Bomber Force Organization," *China Aerospace Studies Institute*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/3016239/pla-air-force-bomber-force-organization/>, 11.

¹⁶ Tara Copp, "US B-52s again fly in contested airspace of South China Sea claims," *Air Force Times*, June 6, 2018, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2018/06/06/us-b-52s-again-fly-in-contested-airspace-of-south-china-sea-claims/>; 《2018年6月6日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会》, 中华人民共和国外交部, 2018年6月6日, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjdt_674879/fyrbt_674889/201806/t20180606_7813558.shtml.

¹⁷ 吴敏文:《日本自卫队首次参加‘勇敢之盾’军演意味着什么》, 中国青年报, 2024年6月13日,

伸向亚太的



An image published in July 2024 by the official Xinhua News Agency. It reads, “The black hand extending towards the Asia-Pacific. NATO has already ‘become Washington’s hatchet, lance, and spade.’ ‘Asia-Pacific countries must be vigilant.’” (Source: Xinhua Online)

its joint statement, in addition to connecting the security of Europe and Asia for the first time, it also criticized China the most severely over China’s support for Russia,¹⁸ enraging China. The NATO summit and the Sino-Russian combined patrol near Alaska were temporally close, so it is natural to believe that NATO’s actions and the changes in the combined patrols were somehow related.

Immediately after NATO’s summit, Xinhua News Agency, the Chinese government’s news agency, wrote in an editorial that the “US-led” NATO, by “expanding eastward again and again, squeezed Russia’s geopolitical space and destroyed the security situation in Eurasia,” implying that the USA caused the war in Ukraine.¹⁹ In an article from the same day, Xinhua stacked similar criticisms up, stating that “the USA has become the greatest winner in the Ukraine crisis, having struck its opponent Russia while strengthening its control over its European allies.”²⁰

Once Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, while seeking reassurance of their alliance with the USA, NATO members also began strengthening their military relationships with America’s Asian allies. The aforementioned article called this the “Asia-Pacific-ization of NATO” and defined America’s combining its alliances with different Asian countries into a single alliance as the “NATO-fication of the Asia-Pacific,” and the article asserted that the USA is advancing both simultaneously.²¹ The newspaper *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party,

http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2024-06/13/nw.D110000zgqnb_20240613_2-07.htm; 语冰：《警惕美持续‘松绑’纵容日本军事野心》，解放军报，2024年6月20日，

http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-06-20&paperNumber=11&articleid=933586; 李海：《美日开启‘防卫产业定期协商’机制》，中国国防报，2024年6月24日，http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zggb&paperDate=2024-06-24&paperNumber=04&articleid=933816.

¹⁸ “Washington Summit Declaration,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, July 10, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm.

¹⁹ 董越：《新华时评 | 北约‘亚太化’居心叵测 操弄‘新冷战’不得人心》，新华网，2024年7月12日，<http://www.news.cn/world/20240712/d740e8020b524975a2984386f150c928/c.html>.

²⁰ 刘赞：《国际观察 | 北约再推‘亚太化’危害无穷》，新华网，2024年7月12日，<http://www.news.cn/world/20240712/6d53b59e8dc9411fa2f9a5a252b1ccc0/c.html>.

²¹ 刘赞：《国际观察 | 北约再推‘亚太化’危害无穷》，新华网，2024年7月12日，<http://www.news.cn/world/20240712/6d53b59e8dc9411fa2f9a5a252b1ccc0/c.html>. Until 2022 China called the

featured this topic in an article from July 15. The article mentioned that NATO, with the encouragement of the USA, has been “constantly plotting” to increase its capability to project power into Asia for close to 20 years, and that under the Biden administration, NATO’s advancement into Asia accelerated.²² The article also stated that NATO, being manipulated by the USA, has caused a “values-based conflict” and is building an anti-China alliance that will be useful for America’s China strategy.²³

Three days before the combined patrol near Alaska was conducted, the Chinese military newspaper *Chinese National Defense News* also bemoaned the fact that even though NATO was almost “braindead” under the first Trump administration, during the Biden administration, using the war in Ukraine as a pretext, NATO’s advancement into Asia had accelerated.²⁴ The article also stated,

With NATO’s inviting the leaders of countries such as Japan to the Madrid summit in 2022 as a milestone, the system for NATO’s ‘Asia-Pacific-ization’ has become increasingly complete, and the degree of its institutionalization far exceeds that of the network of global partnerships that NATO has built outside the Asia-Pacific area.²⁵

However, in the end, the article chalked this trend up to an American conspiracy, saying that “the USA is the ultimate promoter of NATO’s Asia-Pacific-ization.”²⁶

Then, on the day that the combined patrol near Alaska was conducted, the mouthpiece of the Chinese military, *Liberation Army News*, also took up the topic of NATO strengthening its military relationships with America’s Asian allies. The article began by summarizing the NATO summit of July 2024, saying that the summit proved that NATO “is a tool of American hegemony” and that NATO is “planning to provoke conflict in all manner of ways,” and then it enumerated criticisms of NATO.²⁷ The article stated that NATO, “under the façade of collective security, is brazenly increasing the pace of the construction of a ‘Global NATO,’” but NATO’s collective security is “duplicitous and is a sham,” and “its essence is to draw lines based on ideology and to form cliques.”²⁸

latter “Little NATO,” but since the expression “Asia-Pacific-ization of NATO” appeared in 2022, “Little NATO” seems to have been supplanted by “NATO-fication of the Asia-Pacific.”

²² 郑韬：《国际观察：北约‘亚太化’与地区和平稳定背道而驰》，人民网，2024年7月15日，<http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2024/0715/c1002-40278017.html>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 王大宁：《北约‘亚太化’脚步越走越急》，中国国防报，2024年7月22日，http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2024-07-22&paperNumber=04&articleid=935800.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 海镜、刘源东：《北约峰会再次暴露扩张对抗野心》，解放军报，2024年7月25日，http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-07-25&paperNumber=11&articleid=936048.

²⁸ Ibid.

The article made clear what China fears specifically: it stated that the USA is “incessantly playing up [the notion] that ‘the security of the Indo-Pacific and the of Atlantic are inseparable’ and is blowing out of proportion [the idea] that there will be a ‘spillover effect’ from the Russian-Ukrainian clash,” and that it is

advancing the ‘Asia-Pacific-ization of NATO’ and the ‘NATO-fication of the Asia-Pacific’ in both directions and is foolishly attempting to replicate the Ukrainian model in the Asia-Pacific, thereby causing the security order of the entire Eurasian continent to fall into grave danger.²⁹

The article’s criticisms did not stop at the USA; the article also mentioned that the USA and “countries such as Japan” colluded to expand NATO’s Indo-Pacific partnerships.³⁰

The aforementioned “Ukrainian model” does not refer to the way that Ukraine has resisted Russia’s invasion. In a May 2022 article in the Chinese Communist Party’s newspaper for intellectuals, *Guangming Daily*, it was implied that the Ukrainian model refers to America’s forcing Russia into a situation in which Russia could not but invade, thereby succeeding in dividing European countries into two camps.³¹ In a December 2024 article in the official newspaper of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, it was asserted that the USA is attempting to apply the Ukrainian model to Taiwan in order to drag China into a proxy war.³² The article even made the interesting claim that the provision of excess defense articles to Taiwan in accordance with the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act makes Taiwan a “quasi-member” of NATO.³³

As these articles indicate, China takes the same position as that of Russia that the USA caused the war in Ukraine, and China believes that despite it being unnecessary for American allies to strengthen their



A cartoon published by the official China News Service in July 2024. Against a blood-spattered background, Uncle Sam uses the cue ball of NATO to knock the world into America's pocket. (Source: China News Online)

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 郑东超:《美国是祸乱世界的‘伏地魔’》,光明日报,2022年5月5日,https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2022-05/05/nw.D110000gmrb_20220505_2-15.htm.

³² 高杨:《美搞台版‘乌克兰模式’立意错误,本质是‘弃台’》,人民政协报,2022年12月31日,http://dzb.rmzxb.com.cn/rmzxbPaper/pc/con/202212/31/content_36136.html.

³³ Ibid.

military relationships with each other, the USA is conspiring to use the Ukraine war that it itself caused as a pretext to integrate its European and Asian alliance networks. China likely fears that the USA will direct the enormous alliance network that results against China, which will have an effect on China's "core interest" of annexing Taiwan. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that China, seeking to deter the anti-China alliance that is being built, would join hands with NATO's nemesis Russia and approach US territory to threaten the American mastermind.

4. The Training Hypothesis

The political signaling hypothesis has some logical problems. The combined patrol on November 30, 2024, during which a strike package including bombers that are capable of nuclear attack was assembled, presented a clearer and more serious threat to US territory, but it was conducted a half year later than the NATO summit, and before it was conducted there were no conspicuous actions by the USA and NATO, so the patrol's relationship with the "Asia-Pacific-ization of NATO" or the "NATO-fication of the Asia-Pacific" that China fears is unclear, and so it can be said that the patrol was ineffective as a political signal. Why would China not send a strong signal in July, when the relationship would be clearest, and send a stronger political message several months later?

There are two possible answers to the question of why the combined patrols changed so much in 2024. The second hypothesis is that the combined patrols of 2024 demonstrated the great improvement in the PLAAF's capability. In other words, one can also propose that China had intended from the beginning to develop the capability to assemble a strike package and conduct a nuclear attack from the air, so each combined patrol had no relationship with the current international situation.³⁴

China has for many years made efforts to complete its "nuclear triad." This is composed of ground-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and air-launched ballistic missiles. In the 1980s China adopted the DF-5 intercontinental ballistic missile, and in the middle of the 2010s it adopted the JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missile, thereby erecting two of the three pillars of its nuclear triad,³⁵ but as the 2010s drew to a close, the final pillar remained to be dealt with. In 2019 the PLAAF officially adopted the H-6N, and in the same year renovations to the 106th Brigade's base were likely finished.³⁶ It is interesting that the Sino-Russian combined patrols began that same year.

In light of the next several points, it is likely that the combined patrols represented training to erect the final pillar of China's nuclear triad. First, the combined patrols have been conducted at

³⁴ During the 2010s, the frequency at which Chinese military aircraft entered Japan's air defense identification zone increased dramatically, but no correlation between that and the state of Sino-Japanese relations could be confirmed. Derek Solen, "Beijing's 'New Normal' in the Skies around Japan," China Aerospace Studies Institute, April 19, 2021, 3, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2575932/beijings-new-normal-in-the-skies-around-japan/>.

³⁵ "JL-2," Missile Threat, April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/jl-2/>.

³⁶ Lee, "China's Air Force Might Be Back in the Nuclear Business."

regular intervals. As was stated before, between 2019 and 2022, the PLAAF conducted patrols once per year in the summer, but from 2022 it began conducting patrols twice per year in the summer and in the winter. The periods during which the combined patrols were conducted did not change even in 2024. Where the combined patrols have been conducted has hardly changed, but in June 2023 the participating aircraft passed through the Miyako Strait for the first time, conducting their first long-distance flight over the Pacific Ocean.³⁷ The types of aircraft that are employed in the combined patrols have gradually increased. Escort fighters were added in November 2022,³⁸ and in December 2023 electronic warfare aircraft were introduced for the first time.³⁹ Taking a comprehensive look at the combined patrols, it is clear that the patrols have gradually evolved.

If the combined patrols are being conducted with no regard for the international situation at that moment, then even if relations with China improve, it is possible that the patrols will continue to be conducted regularly. Completing one's nuclear triad can be restated as the completion of one's nuclear deterrent, and it is likely that even as China continues conducting combined patrols, in the near future it will begin conducting strategic aerial patrols alone in order to demonstrate its own nuclear deterrent capability.

However, even assuming that the purpose of the combined patrols was not to send a political signal, that does not mean that China was viewing the world with a level head. China's anger had reached an extreme level in July 2024, and on September 25 of the same year China conducted its first launch test of a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile in 40 years, firing it into the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁰ Unlike the combined patrols, this was an act that embodied the threat to the continental US. China has from before made it a goal to complete its nuclear triad, but by analyzing the statements, etc., that China released at the same time as the combined patrol near Alaska, it can be seen that China recently believes that it is facing an imminent nuclear threat.

5. China's Nuclear Threat Perception

The combined patrol near Alaska was conducted on July 24, 2024 (July 25 in China and in Switzerland), and the second session of the preparatory committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was held in Geneva from July 22 to August 2, 2024. During

³⁷ 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2023年6月7日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2023/p20230607_02.pdf.

³⁸ It was determined that these were an electronic warfare aircraft using photographs that were released by the Joint Staff Office. 中国機及び推定ロシア機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2022年11月30日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2022/p20221130_02.pdf.

³⁹ 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2023年12月14日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2023/p20231214_02.pdf.

⁴⁰ 《火箭军向太平洋海域成功发射1发洲际弹道导弹》，解放军报，2024年9月26日，http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-09-26&paperNumber=01&articleid=940329; Shizuka Kuramitsu, "China Conducts Rare ICBM Test Over Pacific," Arms Control Association, November 2024, accessed February 18, 2025, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-11/news/china-conducts-rare-icbm-test-over-pacific>.

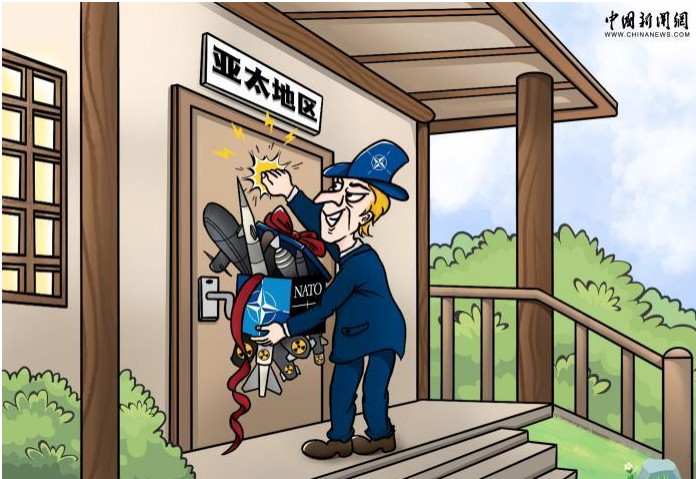
the session's first week of debate, the same week when the joint patrol was conducted, Beijing revealed its concern that the nuclear threat to China is increasing.

On the same day as the joint patrol, the director general of the Arms Control Department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Sun Xiaobo, demanded in a statement to the preparatory committee that the USA abandon its nuclear sharing and extended deterrence policies. Extended deterrence refers to America's policy of deterring nuclear attacks against its allies by threatening to conduct retaliatory nuclear strikes if any of them has suffered a nuclear attack. In spite of its name, nuclear sharing refers not a system in which nuclear weapons are shared, but one in which NATO members possessing nuclear weapons position some nuclear weapons in non-nuclear member states and can have those host members employ those same weapons using dual-capable aircraft. The storage and maintenance of those weapons in non-nuclear member states is conducted by the owning nuclear member, not the host member, and the host member cannot conduct nuclear strikes unilaterally. Nuclear strikes are to be conducted under the direction of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group and the nuclear members, i.e., the USA and the UK. NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement preceded the NPT by more than a decade, and NATO takes the positions that nuclear sharing does not constitute proliferation because nuclear members never transfer nuclear weapons to non-nuclear members, and that it is fine for non-nuclear members' aircraft to employ nuclear weapons because the NPT becomes invalid in wartime.

In his speech, Sun Xiaobo asserted that the USA is plotting to vastly increase the nuclear threat that it poses:

In the past 20 years, the USA, which has the largest nuclear arsenal and the most powerful conventional military power, has single-mindedly pursued absolute strategic advantage; has successively withdrawn from important arms control treaties such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty; has spared no effort to play up competition between great powers; has deployed strategic forces such as nuclear weapons, global antiballistic missile systems, and land-based interceptors at point-blank range around other nuclear powers; has incessantly strengthened its so-called 'nuclear alliances'; and has hankered to build new military alliances.⁴¹

⁴¹ 《中国代表团团长、外交部军控司司长孙晓波在《不扩散核武器条约》第十一次审议大会第二次筹委会上关于核裁军议题的发言》，中华人民共和国外交部，2024年7月26日，https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/jks_674633/fywj_674643/202407/t20240726_11461227.shtml.



A cartoon published in August 2024 by the official China News Agency. NATO knocks on the door of the “Asia-Pacific Region.” The caption plays on the homophones of “nuclear” and “box” to read, “Who dares to accept the evil ‘nukes’ [box] that he brought as a present?” (Source: China News Online)

In addition, in a speech during the next day’s debate, Sun asserted that “in recent years there have been signs [that nuclear sharing] will spread to the Asia-Pacific region,” and he demanded that the USA withdraw the U.S. Army’s Mid-Range Capability missile system from the Philippines and that the USA not provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia.⁴²

China did not end its protestations with speeches, but also held a side event in Geneva on the same day as the combined patrol near Alaska. “Side event” refers to symposia, etc., that are held on the side of other events. At its side event for the second session of the preparatory committee for the

2026 Review Conference of the NPT, China again argued strongly that the USA is threatening peace in East Asia.

The two entities that conducted China’s side event were the Chinese Arms Control and Disarmament Association (CACDA), a “nongovernmental” organization that is controlled by the MFA, and the Strategic Planning Research Institute, Ltd. (SPRI), a subsidiary of the state-owned China National Nuclear Corporation.⁴³ The theme of the side event was “NATO’s Nuclear Sharing: The Threat to the Non-Proliferation Treaty,” and CACDA and SPRI presented the report that they jointly wrote, entitled, “Analysis of How NATO’s Nuclear Sharing Violates the Non-Proliferation Treaty.”⁴⁴ Sun Xiaobo attended the event, where he called on the attendees to “deeply discuss the problems of ‘nuclear sharing’ and ‘extended deterrence’” and “urged the related countries to oppose the duplication of nuclear-sharing arrangements in any form in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁴⁵

CACDA and SIPRI’s report used the same words as those of Sun Xiaobo to express China’s

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ 曾焱:《中国智库报告: 北约核共享危及和平与安全》, 新华网, 2024年7月26日, <http://www.news.cn/world/20240726/f138f419acc7499b9b2c15fa91227ba1/c.html>; 《研究院简介》, 中核战略规划研究总院, <https://www.cinis.com.cn/zhzlghyjzy/gywm17/yjyj/index.html>.

⁴⁴ 曾焱:《中国智库报告: 北约核共享危及和平与安全》; 《研究院简介》, 中核战略规划研究总院; 中国军控与裁军协会、中核战略规划研究总院:《北约核共享违反《不扩散核武器条约》辨析(中文版)》, 中核战略规划研究总院, 2024年7月27日, <https://www.cinis.com.cn/zhzlghyjzy/yjbg/1446904/index.html>. The side event’s English title was more subdued: “Nuclear Sharing Arrangements: Challenges to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).” “Calendar of Side Events for the 2024 NPT Preparatory Committee,” Reaching Critical Will, <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/npt/2024/calendar>.

⁴⁵ 曾焱:《中国智库报告: 北约核共享危及和平与安全》.

concern from its first few lines: “In recent years, there have been signs that nuclear sharing will spread to the Asia-Pacific region.”⁴⁶ However, although the report could point to a debate over nuclear sharing in Japan and a remark concerning nuclear sharing by then-South-Korean-presidential-candidate Yoon Suk Yeol, the report did not point to any real indications and instead attempted to substantiate its claim that nuclear sharing will spread by conflating nuclear sharing and extended deterrence.⁴⁷ The report said that “so-called ‘nuclear sharing’ refers to an arrangement strengthening ‘extended deterrence’ that was reached between the USA and her NATO allies,” twisting the facts by making it seem that nuclear sharing derived from extended deterrence.⁴⁸

The MFA held a press conference on the day after combined patrol near Alaska.⁴⁹ The MFA spokesman highlighted the side event and emphasized some of the points of CACDA and SPRI’s report.⁵⁰ She stated that nuclear sharing violates the NPT and that it is a “special form of nuclear proliferation.”⁵¹ She also urged “the related countries” to abolish nuclear-sharing and not to “duplicate ‘nuclear-sharing’ arrangements in any form in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁵²

China evinces a fear that nuclear sharing stems naturally from extended deterrence. In May 2022 President Biden visited Tokyo, where he and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio agreed to enhance bilateral discussions about extended deterrence,⁵³ but China responded by expressing its “serious concern” about nuclear-sharing between Japan and the USA that was never even discussed.⁵⁴ The MFA spokesman released the following statement:

According to the stipulations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), non-nuclear-weapon signatories promise not to accept nuclear weapons or control over such weapons from any

⁴⁶ 中国军控与裁军协会、中核战略规划研究总院：《北约核共享违反《不扩散核武器条约》辨析(中文版)》。

⁴⁷ 中国军控与裁军协会、中核战略规划研究总院：《北约核共享违反《不扩散核武器条约》辨析(中文版)》；Kim Soo-yeon, “Yoon says he will request redeployment of U.S. tactical nukes in case of emergency,” Yonhap News Agency, September 22, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210922005300320>.

⁴⁷ 中国军控与裁军协会、中核战略规划研究总院：《北约核共享违反《不扩散核武器条约》辨析(中文版)》。

⁴⁸ 中国军控与裁军协会、中核战略规划研究总院：《北约核共享违反《不扩散核武器条约》辨析(中文版)》。

⁴⁹ 《2024 年 7 月 26 日外交部发言人毛宁主持例行记者会》，中华人民共和国外交部，2024 年 7 月 26 日，https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202407/t20240726_11461079.shtml.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders’ Statement: Strengthening the Free and Open International Order,” The White House, May 23, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/japan-u-s-joint-leaders-statement-strengthening-the-free-and-open-international-order/>; 「日米首脳共同声明『自由で開かれた国際秩序の強化』」、外務省、2022 年 5 月 23 日、<https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100347254.pdf>、3～4 頁。

⁵⁴ 《2022 年 5 月 25 日外交部发言人汪文斌主持例行记者会》，中华人民共和国外交部，2024 年 5 月 25 日，https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202205/t20220525_10692555.shtml.

transferor. If Japan engages in ‘nuclear sharing’ with the USA, then this would violate the stipulations of the NPT and would exacerbate nuclear proliferation and the danger of a nuclear clash.⁵⁵

The spokesman also strongly criticized Japan for standing under America’s “nuclear umbrella,” for “opposing and thwarting America’s abandonment of the policy to use nuclear weapons first,” for “conniving at the domestic debate over a ‘nuclear-sharing’ policy that would violate the NPT,” and for “openly debating the revision of the ‘Three Non-Nuclear Principles’ that it itself undertook.”⁵⁶

Japan was not the only country that China criticized. China is also concerned about South Korea’s efforts to enhance America’s extended deterrence. Two days before President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida’s meeting in May 2022, President Biden met with South Korean President Yoon and the two agreed to reactivate the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group.⁵⁷ Then in July 2023 a nuclear ballistic missile submarine of the US Navy made a port call in South Korea for the first time since 1981.⁵⁸ In their report, CACDA and SPRI described both events as “major displays by the USA to substantively strengthen its ‘extended deterrence’ commitment to South Korea,” but they nonetheless cited both as evidence of nascent nuclear sharing between the USA and South Korea, asserting that “a nuclear deterrence alliance that is similar to that of NATO is already close to realization between the USA and South Korea.”⁵⁹

6. Conclusion

Because the Sino-Russian combined patrols have been conducted infrequently, it has been difficult to see the connections between each combined patrol, so the PLAAF’s combined patrols in 2024 tend to be seen as unusual actions for displaying China’s military power. It is natural to conclude that the reason why China would conduct such a demonstration is related to the current international situation, and since China’s anger towards NATO had reached an extreme level when China conducted a combined patrol in July 2024, the hypothesis that China intended to send a political signal to the USA and NATO through a combined patrol was strong.

However, China conducted its clearest and most serious threat in 2024 several months later, when it would seem to be too late for an expression of anger. Judging from the fact that this action

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ 《2022 年 5 月 25 日外交部发言人汪文斌主持例行记者会》，中华人民共和国外交部，2024 年 5 月 25 日，https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202205/t20220525_10692555.shtml.

⁵⁷ “United States-Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement,” The White House, May 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement/>.

⁵⁸ Matt Murphy, “First US nuclear sub docks in South Korea since 1981,” British Broadcasting Corporation, July 18, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66233802>.

⁵⁹ 中国军控与裁军协会、中核战略规划研究总院：《北约核共享违反《不扩散核武器条约》辨析(中文版)》。

does not seem to have been taken in response to any particular action by the USA or NATO, it is difficult to categorize it as a political signal. If the recent combined patrols had no political significance, then it is possible that past combined patrols did not, too. Viewing the combined patrols comprehensively, it is clear that their true significance lies in China's years-long effort to complete its nuclear triad. However, this does not mean that China's anger towards the USA and NATO has abated; rather, China's concerns with respect to the USA and NATO are growing stronger.

In addition, China probably fears that the limited exchange between NATO and America's Asian allies will eventually lead to the integration of America's European and Asian alliance networks, resulting in the formation of a global, nuclear-armed anti-China alliance. One of the aforementioned articles pointed out that NATO has crossed the boundaries of Europe and is bound together by values, but it is possible that China also fears that Japan and South Korea may someday join NATO on the basis of being democracies. China probably fears that Japan and South Korea would "share" American and British nuclear weapons if they were to join NATO. China likely fears that whether it is the "NATO-fication of the Asia-Pacific" or it is the "Asia-Pacific-ization of NATO," in the end the USA will "proliferate" nuclear weapons to members of a powerful anti-China alliance.

China's worries are obviously excessive, but the USA and its allies have neither the obligation nor the ability to alleviate China's anxiety. However, it is certain that as China's nuclear capabilities strengthen, the place that nuclear weapons occupy in China's international relations will grow. China's pledge of no first use (NFU) is actually vague, and speaking practically, it is the policy that countries that have no way to win a nuclear exchange—in other words, countries with weak nuclear capabilities—have no choice but to adopt, so if China's nuclear capabilities strengthen, then even if China continues to pledge NFU, it is quite possible that it will substantially abandon NFU. How China, which has strong suspicions of the USA and NATO, and understands the world through conspiracy theories, will use its nuclear capabilities is likely to become a major issue in the future. It is not as if this is unrelated to Japan, which does not possess nuclear weapons. China has long regarded Japan as a nuclear threshold state, as it was recently indicated in an article in *Liberation Army News* that was published on August 15, 2024 (the anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II), in which someone from SPRI asserted that "Japan possesses a massive amount of nuclear material, and the distance for Japan to cross the threshold to nuclear weapons is not far."⁶⁰ Therefore, China will probably categorize even Japan, which does not possess nuclear weapons and which strictly observes its Three Non-Nuclear Principles, as a nuclear threat.

⁶⁰ 赵学林、宋岳：《美日强化‘延伸威慑’破坏地区和平稳定》，解放军报，2024年8月15日，http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-08-15&paperNumber=11&articleid=937603.

The views that are expressed in this report are solely those of the author, who is presenting his views as a part of the research that is being conducted at the JASDF Air & Space Studies Institute of the Japan Air Self Defense Force. Therefore, his views do not necessarily represent the views of the Japanese Ministry of Defense and the Japan Air Self Defense Force or the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Air Force.

(Reference)

Sino-Russian Combined Strategic Aerial Patrols

Patrol Date	Flight Path of Chinese Bombers	Identified Chinese Bombers
July 23, 2019	East China Sea → Tsushima Strait → Sea of Japan → Tsushima Strait → East China Sea	(1) H-6K 20210: 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division ¹
December 22, 2020	(A) East China Sea → Tsushima Strait → Sea of Japan → Tsushima Strait → East China Sea (B) East China Sea → Miyako Strait → Pacific Ocean → Miyako Strait → East China Sea	(1) H-6K 20213: 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division (2) H-6K 20118: 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division ²
November 19, 2021	Sea of Japan → Tsushima Strait → East China Sea → Miyako Strait → Pacific Ocean → East China Sea	(1) H-6K 20214: 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division (2) H-6K 20215 (assessed): 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division ³
May 24, 2022	(A) East China Sea → Tsushima Strait → Sea of Japan → Tsushima Strait → East China Sea (B) East China Sea → Miyako Strait → Pacific Ocean → Miyako Strait → East China Sea	(1) H-6K 20213: 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division ⁴
November 30, 2022	(A) East China Sea → Tsushima Strait → Sea of Japan (B) Sea of Japan → Tsushima Strait → Miyako Strait → East China Sea	(1) H-6K 20213: 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division ⁵
June 6, 2023	East China Sea → Tsushima Strait → Sea of Japan → Tsushima Strait → East China Sea ⁶	
June 7, 2023	East China Sea → Miyako Strait → Pacific Ocean → Miyako Strait → East China Sea ⁷	
December 14, 2023	East China Sea → Tsushima Strait → Sea of Japan → East China Sea	(1) H-6K 20613: 29 th Regiment, 10 th Division ⁸
July 24, 2024	Chukchi Sea → Bering Sea → Pacific Ocean	(1) H-6K 20013: 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division (2) H-6K 20215: 28 th Regiment, 10 th Division ⁹
November 29, 2024	East China Sea → Tsushima Strait → Sea of Japan → Tsushima Strait → East China Sea	(1) H-6N 55334: 106 th Brigade ¹⁰
November 30, 2024	East China Sea → Miyako Strait → Pacific Ocean → Miyako Strait → East China Sea ¹¹	

The serial numbers on Chinese military aircraft indicate the units to which they belong. The PLAAF's aviation divisions still use a numbering system that was adopted in 2005.¹² The aircrafts' serial numbers are composed of five digits, and after replacing those numbers with the letters "ABCDE," one can read them in the following manner. First, one can determine the division to which an aircraft belongs by subtracting 11 from "AD."¹³ Taking the serial number 20210 as an example, one gets 10 by subtracting 11 from "21," so one can determine that the bomber

belongs to the 10th Division. Aviation regiments received sequential numbers, so the 1st Division has the subordinate 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments; the 2nd Division has the subordinate 4th, 5th, and 6th Regiments; and skipping several divisions, the 10th Division has the subordinate 28th, 29th, and 30th Regiments.¹⁴ “BCE” in the serial number is that aircraft’s individual number, but it also indicates the regiment to which it belongs. Numbers from 001 to 049 indicate the division’s first subordinate regiment; numbers 051 to 099 indicate the second; numbers from 101 to 150 indicate the third.¹⁵ The number “020” in the serial number 20210 is less than 049, so it indicates the 28th Regiment. However, the serial numbers that begin with 55 do not follow the numbering system above. They seem to only appear on H-6Ns, and because the 106th Brigade is the only unit operating the H-6N, it is possible that 55 indicates the 106th Brigade.¹⁶

¹ 「中国機及びロシア機の東シナ海及び日本海における飛行について」、統合幕僚監部、2019年7月23日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2019/p20190723_01.pdf。

² 「中国機及びロシア機の東シナ海及び日本海における飛行について」、統合幕僚監部、2020年12月22日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2020/p20201222_02.pdf。

³ 「中国機及びロシア機の東シナ海、日本海及び太平洋における飛行について」、統合幕僚監部、2021年11月19日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2021/p20211119_01.pdf。

⁴ 「中国及びロシア軍用機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2022年5月24日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2022/p20220524_01.pdf。

⁵ 「中国機及び推定ロシア機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2022年11月30日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2022/p20221130_02.pdf。

⁶ 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2023年6月6日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2023/p20230606_02.pdf。

⁷ 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2023年6月7日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2023/p20230607_02.pdf。

⁸ 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2023年12月14日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2023/p20231214_02.pdf。

⁹ North American Aerospace Defense Command Public Affairs, “NORAD detects, tracks and intercepts Russian and PRC aircraft operating in the Alaska ADIZ,” North American Aerospace Defense Command, July 24, 2024, <https://www.norad.mil/Newsroom/Press-Releases/Article/3849184/>; “Russian Aerospace forces, Chinese Air Force conduct joint air patrol,” TASS, July 25, 2024, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://tass.com/defense/1821093>。

¹⁰ 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2024年11月29日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2024/p20241129_01.pdf。

¹¹ 「中国軍機及びロシア軍機の動向について」、統合幕僚監部、2024年11月30日、https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2024/p20241130_01.pdf。

¹² Yefim Gordon and Dmitriy Komissarov, *Chinese Air Power: Current Organisation and Aircraft of All Chinese Air Forces* (Hersham, UK: Midland, 2010), 12。

¹³ Andreas Rupprecht, *Modern Chinese Warplanes: Chinese Air Force – Aircraft and Units* (Houston, TX: Harpia, 2018), 22。

¹⁴ Gordon and Komissarov, 12。

¹⁵ Rupprecht, 22。

¹⁶ Roderick Lee, “China’s Air Force Might Be Back in the Nuclear Business,” *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2020, accessed April 3, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/chinas-air-force-might-be-back-in-the-nuclear-business/>。