

China's military buildup: The biggest since 1945?

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The Australian government claims that China has made the biggest military buildup of any country since 1945. The statement is contained in the [2023 Strategic Review](#): 'China's military build-up is now the largest and most ambitious of any country since the end of the Second World War.' The claim has been repeated in several media interviews by the Defence Minister Richard Marles in Australia and overseas.

Such claims are hard to pin down since analysing them throws up different possible methods for assessing a buildup, let alone its ambition. Nevertheless, on the basis of a normal interpretation of 'biggest military buildup' since 1945, the dubious honour falls to the USSR in the 23-year period from 1962 (the Cuban missile crisis) to 1985 when it was engaged in global confrontation with the United States and military confrontation with China on their mutual border.

If we compare the surge we saw in the USSR in that 23-year period with the surge in China's buildup in a similar time span, between 2000-2023, the conclusion is stark. China's build up is not only smaller in terms of comparative growth rates in key categories of military capability (nuclear warheads, intercontinental missiles, submarines, and principal surface combatants), but the end point in numbers arrived by China at the end of its 23-year buildup are far smaller than those achieved by the USSR in 1985.

For example, the USSR had 40,000 nuclear warheads in 1985 and China in 2023 has only 500. The USSR in 1985 had ten times the number of intercontinental and sea-launched nuclear ballistic missiles as China does today. China is currently engaged in a modernisation and likely expansion of its forces in coming years, but the comparison over 23 years between China (2002-2025) and the Soviet period (1962-1985) would not change significantly. For the time being, however, the claim by the Australian government would not appear to be borne out by the facts.

There is another contender to join the ranks ahead of China in the record for the biggest military buildup since 1945, and that is the United States in the 23 years from 1949 to 1972. This period began just after the start of the Cold War in 1948, the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949, and the victory of Communist Forces in the Chinese Civil War in the same year. In that period, the US fought two major local wars: in Korea and in Vietnam. The end point of this period is marked by détente between the US and both the USSR and China, and the US-Soviet strategic arms limitation agreements.

Table 1 below offers a comparison of numbers for selected categories of military platforms and for nuclear warheads at the end point of the three different buildups over the selected 23-year periods. The data shows that China cannot claim to have the biggest military buildup since 1945, and that it sits well behind the USSR and the US in that effort.

Table 1: Platform numbers at the end-point of the buildup

US 1972, USSR 1985, CHINA 2023. Source*

	US 1972	USSR 1985	PRC 2023
ICBM	1,000	1,396	350
SLBM	656	983	72
N-Warheads	26,516	~40,000	~500
Strategic Submarines (SSB or SSBN)	41	70	6
Attack Submarines (SSK and SSN)	94	206	53
Aircraft Carriers	17	3	2
Principal Surface Combatants	242	280	97
Bomber ACFT	455	847	500
Tactical Combat ACFT	7,560	6,300	2,394
Tanks	9,434	52,600	4,200
Artillery	6,318	39,000	7,600

The government's intent in using the phrase 'biggest military buildup' in connection with China is to imply it is the biggest military or strategic threat that Australia and its allies have faced since 1945.

This implication is reinforced by the equally questionable claim [by the prime minister](#) and many officials over several years that Australia faces its most challenging strategic environment since 1945. This proposition is as easily contradicted by the facts as the claim about biggest military buildup, as analysed in my critique in the journal of the International Institute of Strategic Studies, under the title, '[Australia's Drums of War](#)' published in 2021.

China poses clear threats to Australian strategic and military interests, but the pace and scale of its military buildup have only been modest compared with the two historical examples cited. The categories selected for Table 1 relate primarily to China's capability to project power well beyond its coastal areas and beyond Taiwan. That set of categories used is one often seen in comparisons of national military capabilities in the broad.

In contrast, there are categories of platforms where the buildup has been more rapid and consequential, such as in dual-use (conventional or nuclear) intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) and smaller ships (corvettes) and patrol craft. Yet these capabilities relate almost entirely to coastal areas or near sea areas, especially for localised contingencies involving Taiwan and/or Japan.

The rapid expansion of these lighter and smaller maritime forces and the large number of IRBMs for localised contingencies is what Australia and its allies need to address. In particular, the expansion of the number of smaller patrol craft would be a particularly powerful enabler for unconventional scenarios of strategic pressure by China on Taiwan. It is doubtful that the exaggeration of China's general military buildup is helpful in achieving that focus. China has good options for irregular operations and subversion against Taiwan that it will almost certainly take before risking a major military confrontation with the US and its allies.

*Data is not fully consistent in different sources. For China, the data in Table 1 is based on the US Dept of Defence, '[Military and Security Developments in the People's Republic of China](#),' October, 2023. Data for the USSR is based on Department of Defense, '[Soviet Military Power 1986](#),' 1986. Data for the US is based on several official US documents. These include '[The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Military Policy 1969-72](#),' 2013; Naval History and Heritage Command, '[US Ship Force Levels 1886-Present](#),' undated; US Dept of State, '[Transparency in the US Nuclear Weapons Stockpile](#),' undated; and Congressional Research

Service, 'US/Soviet Military Balance Statistical Trends' 1970-1980,' October 1981. The author has also consulted IISS, 'The Military Balance 1973,' 1973. Note that the census date for these various sources is not always clear but the author has assumed them to refer to platform holdings during the year indicated in Table 1 even if the publication date is the year following.

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