

China's Dual-Capable Missiles and Inadvertent Nuclear Escalation

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China's expanding force of dual-capable missiles is creating a growing source of ambiguity in U.S.-China deterrence. The People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) operates conventional and nuclear missile forces, including systems capable of supporting either mission. Beijing continues to declare a [no-first-use policy](#), and there is no straightforward evidence that Chinese leaders have deliberately lowered the threshold for nuclear employment. The more consequential concern is operational. During a crisis, U.S. forces may track a Chinese missile unit without knowing whether it is supporting a conventional or nuclear mission. A conventional strike against such a system could therefore be interpreted in Beijing as an attempt to degrade China's nuclear deterrent.

Nuclear-Conventional Ambiguity in the PLARF

China's stated nuclear posture remains comparatively restrained. Beijing describes its nuclear force as [defensive and intended for retaliation](#) and [Fiona Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel](#) find that Chinese strategists have viewed nuclear escalation as difficult to control once nuclear weapons are employed. Dual-capable systems therefore should not be treated as evidence that China intends earlier nuclear use. They do, however, complicate an adversary's ability to distinguish conventional and nuclear operations.

The [DF-26](#) provides the clearest example. The road-mobile intermediate-range ballistic missile can threaten Guam and conduct conventional land-attack, anti-ship, and nuclear missions. The U.S. Department of Defense assesses that the DF-26 was designed to allow rapid changes between conventional and nuclear warheads. Identifying a launcher, therefore, does not necessarily reveal its assigned mission. James Acton describes this as [pre-launch ambiguity](#). An opponent may know the missile launch system while remaining uncertain whether it is configured for conventional or nuclear use.

China's command arrangements reduce some risk but do not eliminate this ambiguity. A [2024 China Aerospace Studies Institute assessment](#) finds that nuclear launch authority remains centralized under the Central Military Commission, while conventional PLARF forces can operate through joint campaign command structures. [David Logan](#) likewise argues that Chinese nuclear and conventional forces are less entangled than some assessments suggest, although risks remain around dual-capable systems. Organizational separation may reduce unauthorized-use risk, but it does not allow U.S. decision-makers to identify a dispersed unit's mission with confidence.

Pathways to Inadvertent Escalation

The greatest escalation risk arises when U.S. conventional operations threaten assets that China associates with the survivability of its nuclear forces. In a Taiwan conflict, U.S. forces could

have strong incentives to strike PLARF launchers, sensors, communications systems, or command nodes supporting conventional missile attacks. [Caitlin Talmadge](#) has shown that such operations could also affect systems relevant to China's ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons. Beijing could therefore struggle to determine whether U.S. attacks were limited conventional operations or the opening phase of a broader counterforce campaign.

China might respond by dispersing nuclear units, increasing readiness, or altering command-and-control procedures to preserve its retaliatory capability. Although Beijing could view those steps as defensive, U.S. officials might interpret the same activity as preparation for nuclear employment. Acton's research on [escalation through entanglement](#) shows how attacks on systems supporting both nuclear and conventional missions can produce this kind of misread warning. Actions taken to preserve deterrence on one side can therefore appear threatening to the other.

The literature cautions against treating this pathway as inevitable. [Wu Riqiang](#) concludes that the overall probability of inadvertent U.S.-China nuclear escalation remains extremely low, citing the likely survivability of much of China's nuclear force and strong controls over nuclear use. Logan similarly finds less entanglement than some earlier studies implied. These findings weaken claims that conventional conflict would naturally progress toward nuclear use, but they do not remove the narrower concern that dual-capable forces can make wartime actions harder to interpret.

The scale of that problem may grow as China expands its missile forces. The [2026 Nuclear Notebook](#) estimates approximately 300 DF-26 launchers across eight brigades, while noting that not all are assigned nuclear missions. Henrik Staalhane Hiim, M. Taylor Fravel, and Magnus Langset Troan describe an ["entangled security dilemma"](#) in which measures to improve security taken by either China or the U.S. can increase the other side's concern about nuclear-force survivability. Ambiguity can therefore shape broader perceptions of intent during a crisis.

Implications for Strategic Stability

U.S. planning should treat nuclear-conventional ambiguity as both a targeting and crisis-management problem. Before striking a PLARF launcher, sensor, communications system, or command node, planners should assess whether the target may also support nuclear operations and whether its destruction could be interpreted as part of a disarming campaign. This does not require excluding dual-use targets from conventional plans, but it does require weighing military value against escalation risk.

Risk reduction also requires mechanisms that can clarify intent during a crisis. Missile notifications, protected communication channels, and clearer procedures for signaling changes in nuclear readiness could reduce uncertainty without revealing sensitive operational details. China's advance notification before its [September 2024 Pacific ICBM test](#) demonstrates that limited transparency around strategic missile activity is possible. U.S. and allied exercises should also include ambiguous PLARF movements and attacks on dual-use systems so that decision-makers confront these risks before an actual crisis.

China's dual-capable missiles do not demonstrate that Beijing has abandoned no first use or deliberately lowered its nuclear threshold. The more important concern is that this threshold may become harder for an adversary to identify during conventional conflict. If U.S. operations threaten assets associated with China's nuclear deterrent, defensive measures taken by either side could be interpreted as preparation for escalation. Managing that uncertainty will become increasingly important to strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific.

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