



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

## In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 45/2024

18 October 2024

### China's ICBM Test: An Analysis

Mr Prahlad Kumar Singh

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies



Source: [CNN](#)



**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

**Keywords:** China, ICBM, PLARF

## About the test

On September 25, China launched an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) carrying a dummy warhead into the Western Pacific Ocean. The official statement from China's Ministry of National Defense stated that the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) carried out this test as a "routine arrangement" and "not directed against any country or target".<sup>1</sup> Chinese Defence Ministry Spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang said that the launch was conducted to assess the performance of the troops' weapons, equipment, and training levels. He said, "China always follows a policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy that focuses on self-defence."<sup>2</sup>

The missile flew almost 12,000 kilometres (7,460 miles) from its launch point on Hainan Island. It travelled over the Philippines and Guam before splashing down in the Pacific Ocean near the French Polynesian Marquesas Islands. Although the type of missile was not revealed, many analysts, through analysis of photos and range, concluded that it was a variant of DF-31 and most likely the DF-31AG.<sup>3</sup>

The DF-31 entered into service in 2006 and can carry a single warhead. It has two variants, the DF-31A and the DF-31AG, with a range of up to 13,200 km (8,200 miles). The DF-31 is a silo-based system, but its models, the DF-31A and DF-31AG, both have a mobile launch system that provides manoeuvrability to operate across a variety of terrains. This test was the first full-range test of the DF-31.<sup>4</sup>

The last time China publicly conducted a test into the ocean was in May 1980, when the DF-5 missile was launched from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China and travelled over 9,000 kilometres before hitting a target in the South Pacific. It was the DF-5's first full-range flight test.<sup>5</sup>

## How Countries Responded

China claimed that it had informed neighbouring countries in advance. However, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi refuted this and expressed Japan's growing alarm at China's increasing military activity. He also said that the missile did not fly over Japan and did not cause any damage, but Japan will continue to monitor the situation.<sup>6</sup> Australia also raised concern and asked for an "explanation" from the Chinese government.<sup>7</sup> New Zealand termed the test as "an unwelcome and concerning development".<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, French Polynesian President Brotherson told the *AFP* that the missile had landed near the Marquesas Islands within its exclusive economic zone.

France<sup>9</sup> and the US, however, reported that they had received notification about the test. The Pentagon spokesperson Sabrina Singh described this prior information as "a step in the right direction,

and it does lead to preventing any misperception or miscalculation." She called for more regular notifications from China about space and ballistic missile launches as confidence-building measures.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, the US and China have taken steps to resume military-to-military communications. In August, during Jake Sullivan's visit to China, he met with Central Military Commission Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia and discussed military communication.<sup>11</sup> After this meeting, PLA Southern Theater Commander General Wu Yanan and US Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Samuel Paparo held talks via video conference on September 10.<sup>12</sup> Later, General Wu attended the Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense Conference in Hawaii, where he met with Admiral Paparo again.<sup>13</sup>

### China's ICBM Stockpile and Reasons for the Test

The PLARF currently operates the DF-5, DF-31, and DF-41, all of which are capable of hitting most of the US. The DF-31 and DF-41 are mobile and solid-fueled, with the DF-41 capable of carrying up to five warheads. PLARF is currently working on enhancing radar, satellites and sensors for long-range precision strikes.<sup>14</sup>

There are nine bases under PLARF control. Of these, six bases (Bases 61-66) are responsible for missile operations. Bases 67-69 look after support missions, with Base 67 responsible for managing the central nuclear stockpile and Base 68 handling engineering and physical infrastructure. The newest base, Base 69, is little understood but appears to be responsible for both advanced personnel training and missile tests.<sup>15</sup>

According to an estimate from the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, PLARF operates around 350 launchers for land-based missiles, out of which 135 can reach the US continent. China presently operates 134 ICBMs capable of delivering 240 warheads.

In recent years, several corruption cases within the PLARF have undermined its credibility. By conducting this test, the PLARF seeks to restore and reaffirm its standing both domestically and internationally. Last year, a US intelligence assessment found several problems related to the non-functionality of missile silos in western China. This led to a large-scale purge within the military.<sup>16</sup> Tong Zhao, a senior fellow at Carnegie, argues that after a series of corruption scandals and leadership reshuffling, China, through this test, wants to address international concerns about the effectiveness of its strategic deterrent forces. The internal reason for the test is to boost the morale of the PLARF, and the external factor is to solidify China's international position as a growing power.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Song Zhongping, a former PLARF officer, said full-range flight tests are essential for verifying the performance of new strategic missiles. He said, "Though China's intercontinental ballistic

missiles have good reliability and strong power, we need a certain number of full-range tests to check their operational readiness".<sup>18</sup>

This ICBM test by China can also be interpreted as a strategic signal aimed at US military deployments in the South China Sea region. In April, the US deployed an intermediate-range 'Typhoon Missile System' in the Philippines during their Balikatan Joint Military Exercise. Initially, it was supposed to be withdrawn by the end of September, but there is currently no clarity on how long it will be there. China criticised this move through various statements and termed it as a threat to regional peace. For example, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said it can create "confrontation in the region".<sup>19</sup>

To sum up, this test intends to signal both domestic and international audiences about China's capability to conduct full-range tests despite the setbacks of corruption and leadership reshuffling. For the US and other regional powers, it is a 'deterrence signal' through showing capability. Ultimately, the larger objective is to reaffirm the legitimacy of Xi Jinping's military reforms and modernisation.

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Lin Congyi, "The MND: The PLA Rocket Force Launched an ICBM to the High Seas in the Pacific Ocean", Ministry of National Defense, September 25, 2024, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16340554.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16340554.html). Accessed on October 01, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Liu Xuanzun, "China's ICBM Test Launch Legitimate, Reasonable Routine Training: Chinese Defense Ministry", *Global Times*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202409/1320419.shtml>. Accessed on October 02, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Ashish Dangwal, "Dong Feng-31: Traveling 12,000 KM, China Likely Fired DF-31 ICBM That Can Carry Multiple Nuke Warheads – Experts." *EURASIAN TIMES*, September 29, 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/1-what-we-know-about-the-variant-used/>. Accessed on October 03, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvie Zhuang and Seong Hyeon Choi, "What Do We Know About the DF-31 Variant Used in China's Recent ICBM Test?" *South China Morning Post*, September 27, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3280264/what-do-we-know-about-df-31-variant-used-chinas-recent-icbm-test>. Accessed on October, 4, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Zhao Lei, "Missile Launch Test Achieved Desired Goals, PLA Says", *China Daily*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202409/26/WS66f49ff2a310f1265a1c4da2.html>. Accessed on October 04, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> The Mainichi, "China's Growing Military Activity a Serious Concern: Japan Spokesman", September 25, 2024, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20240925/p2g/00m/0in/036000c>. Accessed on October 04, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> "Australia Says Seeking 'Explanation' For Chinese ICBM Launch", *BARRON'S*, September 25, 2024, [https://www.barrons.com/news/australia-says-seeking-explanation-for-chinese-icbm-launch-530ba1a9?refsec=topics\\_afp-news](https://www.barrons.com/news/australia-says-seeking-explanation-for-chinese-icbm-launch-530ba1a9?refsec=topics_afp-news). Accessed on October 01, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> "New Zealand Says China Missile Test 'Unwelcome and Concerning'", *BARRON'S*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.barrons.com/news/new-zealand-says-china-missile-test-unwelcome-and-concerning-d19dea21>. Accessed on October 04, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> "French Polynesia says Chinese missile landed 'not far' from its economic zone", *RFI*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20240926-france-polynesia-says-chinese-missile-landed-not-far-from-its-eez-in-pacific>. Accessed on October 02, 2024.

- <sup>10</sup> “US Hails Early Notice of China ICBM Test to Avoid Miscalculation”, *Bloomberg*, September 26, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-09-26/us-hails-china-s-advanced-notice-of-icbm-test-as-good-thing>. Accessed on October 04, 2024.
- <sup>11</sup> Li Jiayao, Ed., “CMC Vice-Chairman Zhang Youxia Meets US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan”, *China Military*, September 29, 2024, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CMC/News\\_209224/16334473.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CMC/News_209224/16334473.html). Accessed on October 04, 2024.
- <sup>12</sup> Simon McCarthy, “US And Chinese Commanders Hold Rare Talks to Dial Down Risk of ‘Miscalculation’”, *CNN*, September 10, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/10/china/us-china-military-talks-commanders-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed on October 1, 2024.
- <sup>13</sup> Hayley Wong, “PLA Sends South China Sea Commander to US for First Time in Over 2 Years”, *South China Morning Post*, September 24, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3279769/pla-sends-south-china-sea-commander-us-first-time-over-2-years>. Accessed on October 04, 2024.
- <sup>14</sup> “PLA Rocket Force”, China Aerospace Studies Institute, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Toolkit%20presentations/3%20CASI%20Commanders%20Toolkit-%20PLARF.pdf>, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>15</sup> MA XIU, “PLA Rocket Force Organization - Executive Summary”, China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2016, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/PLARF/2022-01-05%20PLARF%20Organization%20ExecSum.pdf>, p. 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Peter Martin and Jennifer Jacobs, “US Intelligence Shows Flawed China Missiles Led Xi to Purge Army”, *Bloomberg*, January 6, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-06/us-intelligence-shows-flawed-china-missiles-led-xi-jinping-to-purge-military>. Accessed on October 05, 2024.
- <sup>17</sup> Tong Zhao, “Following serious corruption scandals in PLARF,...”, *X (Formerly Twitter)*, September 25, 2024, <https://x.com/zhaot2005/status/1838986609301012753>. Accessed on October 05, 2024.
- <sup>18</sup> Lei, n. 5.
- <sup>19</sup> “Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi Warns Philippines Over U.S. Missile Deployment”, *The Hindu*, July 27, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/chinese-foreign-minister-wang-yi-warns-philippines-over-us-missile-deployment/article68452719.ece>. Accessed on October 05, 2024.