

January 9, 2024

Secretary Lloyd Austin  
The Department of Defense  
The Pentagon  
Washington DC 20585

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Bloomberg News reported that US intelligence assessments called into question the reliability and functionality of China's growing arsenal of long-range nuclear-armed missiles. The article mentioned that some silo doors on ICBMs may function properly, and ICBM stages or components may have been filled with water. None of this information has been included or publicly cited in reports or speeches by US Defense Department officials or military officers, even as public concern about the pace of China's reported nuclear buildup has increasingly influenced US thinking about both deterrence, alliance management, and nuclear weapons procurement.

We would not expect, or want the USG Government to comment on sensitive intelligence. However, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) would like to know if such assessments exist and, if so, whether you and the authors of the US Department of Defense report, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," published on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, were aware of these assessments prior to its publication. If such assessments exist, and if the authors of the report were aware of their existence, we would also ask why some reference to these indicators were not included in the report and testimony related to China's reported nuclear build-up.

The growth of China's nuclear weapons capabilities has become a serious question and concern for the United States, both within the Government and the public, and among US allies in East Asia and Europe. The growth and reported capabilities of China's nuclear arsenal are being used increasingly to justify current and potentially additional increases in US nuclear capabilities and spending, and to support expanding military and even nuclear collaboration with US allies in East Asia. The accuracy of Department of Defense documents with regard to China's nuclear capabilities are central to informing these debates in Congress as well as among security experts and

the broader public, and thus, ensuring they are accurate and complete is essential. As you are no doubt aware, the Soviet Military Report series produced by the Department of Defense during the Cold War was found after the fact to have systematically overinflated Soviet capabilities. It would be appropriate for the Defense Department to remember past trends and ensure lessons learned are incorporated into ongoing public documents about countries that threatened US and US allied security..

FAS also has a direct interest in ensuring that US Government reports on nuclear capabilities are as accurate and balanced as possible, given that FAS experts remain a central resource for the global public about nuclear capabilities throughout the world. While the FAS does not take US estimates verbatim, we do use them as source material and believe the statements of the US should be as accurate and reliable as possible. As such, FAS has a particular interest in ensuring that its work is not mistakenly or deliberately biased by government sources that include worst-case estimates or that fail to provide important assessments about the reliability, pace, and operational status of key systems. Having engaged in key debates on nuclear policy for over 70 years, FAS has a strong institutional basis for wanting to use reliable information from governments, but at the same time, keenly remembers periods between the 1960-1980s when the Department of Defense produced annual assessments of Soviet military capabilities that widely overinflated conventional and nuclear capabilities, which may have ultimately contributed to unnecessary arms investments in the United States.

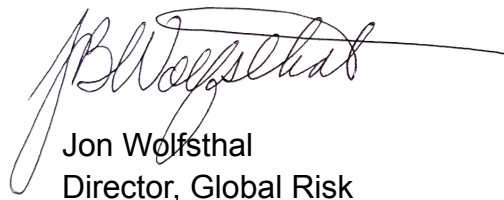
As such, FAS would kindly request that your department make clear:

- 1) Was the Department of Defense aware of intelligence before the publication of Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China that Chinese procurement flaws may have led to missile silo doors that are not operational, or that missiles that were filled with water and not fuel;
- 2) Does the Department intend to either amend or withdraw the current report to Congress and update it with a broader reliance on information—not only about the growth of China's nuclear capabilities but also information that may acknowledge the possible unreliability of such systems so that it may be factored into the public debate in Congress and elsewhere?
- 3) Were US Strategic Command or US Indo-Pacific Command aware in 2023 of the information reported on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024 that China's siloed ICBMs may be less than fully reliable? If so, why was that information not included in speeches and publications?

4) Lastly, is the Department considering changes to how its reports are produced, reviewed, and promoted to ensure not only that China's growing capabilities are included but that they also information that might inform a more complete assessment of the nature, scale, and pace of China's nuclear capabilities might pose to the US and our allies?

For over 70 years, the Federation of American Scientists has played a key role in supporting public debate over issues related to security, technology, and nuclear weapons. We appreciate your interest in ensuring the public engages in a sustained discourse over appropriate defense investments and strategy to secure American and allied security in the coming decades. Your attention to this matter is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,



Jon Wolfsthal  
Director, Global Risk