

NOT IN THE CARDS: U.S.-CHINA ARMS CONTROL IN THE ERA OF MULTIPOLAR COMPETITION

The distribution of power at the international level and the intensity of the security rivalry can explain the trajectory of arms control between China and the United States. Washington and Beijing were able to work together during the second half of the Cold War and for much of unipolarity because the system was bipolar and the security competition was mild or non-existent. The advent of multipolarity and the ensuing intense security competition put an end to Sino-American cooperation on arms control. The current circumstances are not conducive to a resumption of exchanges.

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Few weapons of mass destruction have preoccupied American decision-makers more than China's nuclear stockpile. Initially, Beijing's nuclearization summoned the specter of an atomic Armageddon.¹ But because China's desire to acquire its own nuclear weapons led to a deepening rift with the Soviet Union, its membership in the atomic club turned out to be a boon for Washington, allowing the United States to put pressure on Moscow with the help of skillful triangular diplomacy.² China began participating in international nuclear dialogues in the late 1970s after launching its reform and openness policy. The first nation to make a no first use pledge, China became a party to Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1992.³ It then became involved in the negotiations on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and signed the treaty in 1996, but has yet to ratify it.⁴ Beijing's reservations towards the CTBT were not, at the time, a manifestation of its desire to build an atomic stockpile to match Washington's. Unlike its exponentially growing economy and conventional military, the Chinese nuclear arsenal has been growing only gradually.⁵ According to the former leader of PRC, Deng Xiaoping, the purpose of Chinese nuclear weapons is "to show that we have what they have. If they want to destroy us, they themselves will also suffer some retaliation."⁶ China claims that the central role of its nuclear posture and capabilities is to have defensive and counterstrike means against nuclear coercion.⁷

The Modernization of China's Nuclear Arsenal

But as a 21st century Cold War is brewing between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC), few in Washington believe Beijing will continue to exercise self-restraint in the nuclear domain. Even worse, the emerging consensus is that China's nuclear weapons are more of a challenge than an opportunity in the current multipolar system. Specifically, Beijing appears to have embarked on a significant

¹ Shu Guang Zhang, "Between 'Paper' and 'Real Tigers': Mao's View of Nuclear Weapons," in *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy since 1945*, ed. John Lewis Gaddis (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 196.

² Eliza Gheorghe, "Peace for Atoms. US Non-Proliferation Policy and the Romanian Role in the Sino-American Rapprochement, 1969–1971," *The International History Review*, Vol. 40, No. 5 (2018), p. 1049–56.

³ Henrik Stålhane Hiim, *China and International Nuclear Weapons Proliferation: Strategic Assistance*, 1st ed. (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), p. 2.

⁴ Zou Yunhua, *China and the CTBT Negotiations* (Palo Alto, CA: CISAC, December 1998), p. 8.

⁵ Nicola Horsburgh, *China and Global Nuclear Order: From Estrangement to Active Engagement* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶ Zhongyang junwei bangongting, ed., Deng Xiaoping guanyu xin shiqi jundui jianshe lunshuxuanbian [Deng Xiaoping's essay on military construction in the new era] (Beijing: Bayi chubanshe, 1993), p. 44–45, cited in Wu Riqiang, "Living with Uncertainty: Modeling China's Nuclear Survivability," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (1 April, 2020), p. 113. On assured retaliation, see Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1 October, 2015), p. 7–50.

⁷ Bin Li, "Analysis of China's Nuclear Strategy," *Zhongguo Hezhanlue Bianxi, Shijiejingji Yu Zhengzhi* Vol. 9 (2006), p. 16–22 cited in Liu Chong, "The Relationship between Nuclear Weapons and Conventional Military Conflicts," in Bin Li and Zhao Tong ed. *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 153.

nuclear modernization campaign, fielding new weapon systems and increasing the number of deployed warheads.⁸ Such a change in Beijing's nuclear posture should not be surprising given China's growing wealth. Maintaining a minimal nuclear deterrent no longer behooves the PRC, now that it has been recognized as a great power. Bigger and better nuclear weapons bolster China's claim to being Washington's peer competitor and allow Beijing to exert influence over weaker actors.

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But this modernization effort could not have come at the worst moment in Sino-American relations and global politics, as the ongoing power shift increases the risk of a preventive war.⁹ Washington's realization that China is a force to be reckoned with has led the United States to behave in ways that Beijing regards as hostile and to which it seeks to respond in kind. The ensuing security competition primes the two superpowers for a cycle of action-and-reaction, leading to further destabilizing military build-ups. Forestalling this arms race requires prompt action on arms control.

Failure to Launch Trilateral Arms Control Negotiations

Yet, the mood in neither Washington nor Beijing warrants much optimism. The Trump administration failed to get China to agree to a trilateral arms control regime. During the negotiations to extend the INF in 2019, in addition to the allegations that Russia violated the treaty, the United States complained that the treaty did not restrain China. As former National Security Adviser John Bolton stated, “Cold War-style, bilateral strategic arms negotiations don't make sense when you're in a multipolar nuclear world.”¹⁰ China responded with strong criticism and officially

⁸ Fiona Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, “China's Nuclear Arsenal Is Growing. What Does That Mean for U.S.-China Relations?,” *Washington Post* (11 November, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/11/11/chinas-nuclear-arsenal-is-growing-what-does-that-mean-us-china-relations/>; Fiona S. Cunningham, “Cooperation under Asymmetry? The Future of US-China Nuclear Relations,” *The Washington Quarterly* Vol. 44, No. 2 (3 April, 2021), p. 159–80.

⁹ Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, “Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War,” *International Organization* Vol. 68, No. 1 (January 2014), p. 1–31.

¹⁰ Cited in Leanne Quinn, “China's Stance on Nuclear Arms Control and New START,” *Arms Control Association* (23 August, 2019), <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2019-08-23/chinas-stance-nuclear-arms-control-new-start>

stated that China has no interest in “participating in the so-called trilateral nuclear arms reduction negotiations with the U.S. and Russia.”¹¹ This was not the only time Trump played the China card in a U.S.-Russian arms control treaty. Former President Donald Trump had made China’s participation in the New START Treaty, the only surviving bilateral agreement restricting the nuclear arsenals of the two major nuclear powers, a *sine qua non* for renewal.¹² Beijing refused, arguing that its defensive nuclear posture exempts it from cutting down its arsenal or enhancing its nuclear transparency. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Arms Control Director Fu Cong stated that “At present, it is neither realistic nor reasonable to ask the Chinese side to participate in the China-U.S.-Russia trilateral arms control negotiations. The Chinese side clearly opposes it.”¹³ After Trump’s departure from the White House, the Biden administration has continued to trade barbs with Beijing over nuclear risk reduction, making the prospects of a Sino-American arms control treaty even more remote.¹⁴

Explaining the Rise and Fall of U.S.-China Arms Control

But the U.S.-China rift was not always this bad. In the 1980s and 1990s, Beijing and Washington achieved high levels of cooperation and transparency in arms control.¹⁵ Chinese and U.S. laboratories engaged in close exchanges on nuclear weapons, sharing information about their atomic arsenals through visits and scientific interactions. These instances of cooperation raise the following question: “what prevents the United States and China from working together on nuclear risk reduction now?” Providing an answer to this question requires a theory of arms control.

One existing framework emphasizes the gains participants extract from arms control and concerns about cheating.¹⁶ This explanation revolves around the “stability/advantage” conundrum.¹⁷ Because of the uncertainty about others’ intentions in an

¹¹ Cong Fu, “Briefing by Mr. Fu Cong, Director General of the Department of Arms Control and Disarmament of Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China* (6 August, 2019), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1686559.shtml

¹² David M. Allison and Stephen Herzog, “What about China? And the Threat to US–Russian Nuclear Arms Control,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Vol. 76, No. 4 (3 July, 2020), p. 200.

¹³ Cong Fu, “Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry Fu Cong Attends Webinar on Nuclear Disarmament of United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China* (28 August, 2020), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1810953.shtml.

¹⁴ “Biden Airl Hypersonic Missile Fears as Probable Ambassador Labels China ‘Untrustworthy,’” *Deutsche Welle* (20 October 2021), <https://www.dw.com/en/biden-air-hypersonic-missile-fears-as-probable-ambassador-labels-china-untrustworthy/a-59568428>

¹⁵ Wu Riqiang, “How China Practices and Thinks about Nuclear Transparency,” in ed. Bin Li and Zhao Tong *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 235.

¹⁶ Ulrich Thomas Kühn, *The Rise and Fall of Cooperative Arms Control in Europe* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020), p. 43.

¹⁷ Stability and advantage are two of the three goals of arms control identified by John Maurer. See John D. Maurer, “The Purposes of Arms Control,” *Texas National Security Review* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2018).

anarchic, self-help system, states are unable to ascertain whether arm control measures establish a defense-dominant environment or whether they give an advantage to the other side. Seen from this perspective, the U.S. and China cannot engage in arms control because each side fears the other will cheat on its commitments and thus secure a decisive advantage. If one side uses cuts to atomic arsenals to tie the hands of its competitor but keeps plenty of freedom of maneuver for itself, then it can prevail in a crisis. Chinese observers have noted that “the United States would use negotiations to attempt to impose one-sided restrictions on China’s nuclear development.”¹⁸ Under the guise of nuclear risk reduction efforts, Washington could thus lull China into a false sense of security and render it fatally vulnerable to a disarming first strike.

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Another explanation focuses on the nature of the arsenals states seek to regulate. According to this view, when offensive weapons systems can be distinguished from defensive ones and the offense-defense balance favors the defense, arms control treaties are easier to reach.¹⁹ The absence of such an agreement between the United States and China therefore stems either from the indistinguishability of offensive and defensive weapons or from the fact that the US has maintained a robust first strike capability against China. Beijing refuses to engage in arms control lest it exposes itself to a bolt from the blue launched by the United States.

¹⁸ Lu Xiao and Zeng Huafeng, “Quanqiu He Wuqi Anquan Xianzhuang ji Weilai Zouxiang,” [Current State and Future Trends of Global Nuclear Weapons Security], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, Vol. 5, (2018), p. 89; Zhao, “Opportunities for Nuclear Arms Control,” p. 76. Luo, ‘Junkong Yiti’, p. 62, cited in: Henrik Stålhane Hiim and Magnus Langset Troan, “Hardening Chinese Realpolitik in the 21st Century: The Evolution of Beijing’s Thinking about Arms Control,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (24 May, 2021), p. 11. Lu Xiao & Zeng Huafeng, “Quanqiu He Wuqi Anquan Xianzhuang ji Weilai Zouxiang,” [Current State and Future Trends of Global Nuclear Weapons Security] *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, Vol. 5, (2018), p. 89; Zhao, ‘Opportunities for Nuclear Arms Control’. p. 76. Luo (2021), ‘Junkong Yiti’, p. 62.

¹⁹ Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 201, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>.

Some scholars believe that institutions like arms control treaties are the creations of the most powerful states in the system, and their main purpose is to help the hegemon maintain its privileged position in the international system and create a predictable and stable strategic environment.²⁰ Hegemonic stability theory therefore explains the rise and fall of arms control between the United States and China as a manifestation of Beijing's challenge to U.S. primacy. China does not wish to enter an agreement with the United States because it seeks to match and overtake Washington as the dominant power of the globe. The absence of a Sino-American arms control treaty is a sign of Washington's decline and the rise of China.

Systemic Factors

But these explanations do not stand up to close scrutiny. The United States did not sign arms control agreements with the United Kingdom or with India. This absence was not because London or New Delhi wish to overtake Washington as the world's hegemon or because any of these NWS feared that the other side would get an advantage and use it in a disarming strike. Moreover, the United States did not condition the renewal of New START on France or Israel joining the treaty. Deeper, system-wide factors can explain why Washington singled out Beijing in the negotiations around the treaty's renewal and, more importantly, why the U.S. and China used to cooperate on arms control but no longer do. Specifically, the international system has become multipolar, with China and Russia joining the United States as the world's great powers. The Trump Administration recognized this new state of affairs in its 2017 National Security Strategy. While Biden's foreign policy team seeks to distance itself from the bellicose tone of his predecessor, Washington's relations with Moscow, and Beijing are still sour, and likely to get worse. The security rivalry among these three players is intense, as they have divergent interests in numerous theaters of war and strategic issues, from the South China Sea to primacy in advanced technologies, like Artificial Intelligence, space, or hypersonic weapons. The stakes in the security competition between the great powers are high, as the latest rhetoric from both Washington and Beijing suggests that defeat in arenas like Taiwan or space threatens their very survival.

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²⁰ Virginia Haufler, "Crossing the Boundary between Public and Private: International Regimes and Non-State Actors," *Regime Theory and International Relations*, Vol. 94 (1993) cited in Kühn (2018), p. 51.

on arms control. The current circumstances are not conducive to a resumption of exchanges.

The polarity of the international system and the intensity of the security rivalry prevent the great powers from creating effective bilateral or multilateral institutions that could thwart vertical proliferation. They exacerbate the “transparency-security” trade-off, which requires signatories to walk a very fine line between disclosing enough information about their arsenals to alleviate concerns about cheating, while, at the same time, minimizing risk to their survival.²¹ Arms control requires verification but sharing too much about one’s weapons can facilitate a disarming first strike by the adversary. Chinese analysts have expressed concerns that “the United States would utilize negotiations to gain greater insight into China’s military forces,” which would allow Washington to then target China’s nuclear forces more effectively.²² Such fears are not without basis, as the U.S. collected valuable intelligence about the design of Chinese nuclear weapons during the lab-to-lab exchanges of the 1980s and 1990s, which it then used to accuse Beijing of bad faith. In light of this experience, China rejected subsequent calls from the U.S. to create a working group on risk reduction and transparency in the nuclear and strategic capabilities arena.

The situation is likely to get worse before it gets better. In the intensely competitive system of a multipolar world, the U.S., Russia, and China must put in place verification mechanisms that all three great powers find satisfactory. But as the number of actors increases, the chance of devising monitoring arrangements that all parties find acceptable decreases. In this context, concerns about security become more acute, as there are more sources of threat each party must protect itself against. In China’s case, this ability to defend itself against adversaries takes the form of an “uncertain deterrence” posture, premised on the inability of the enemy to know when and how China will retaliate.²³ The more knowledge the adversary has, the greater the damage it can impose on China. Beijing therefore has a powerful incentive to avoid the transparency measures required by cooperative arms control in order to deter its rivals and protect state security.

Systemic factors such as the distribution of power at the international level and the

²¹ Andrew J. Coe and Jane Vaynman, “Why Arms Control Is So Rare,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 114, No. 2 (May 2020), p. 342–55.

²² Luo Xi, “Junkong Yiti zai Zhong-Mei Zhanlüe Duihua Qingdan shang Weizhi Qianyi,” [‘Arms Control is Moving up the Agenda of the Sino-US Strategic Dialogue’], *Shijie Zhishi*, Vol. 9, (2019), p. 62; Luo Xi, “Meiguo Kaiqi Tuichu ‘Zhongdao Tiaoyue’ hou de ‘Liansuo Jincheng’” [‘The Chain Reaction after the US Pulling out of the INF Treaty’], *Shijie Zhishi*, Vol. 20, (2019), p. 54; Chu Fuhai, and Xiang Ganghua, “Guoji He Junbei Kongzhi de Xianshi Kunjing yu Qianjing Chulu,” [‘Current Issues and Prospects in International Nuclear Arms Control’], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, Vol. 4, (2018), p 143–144, cited in Hiim and Trøan (2018), p. 11.

²³ Riqiang (1993).

intensity of the security rivalry are notoriously hard to manipulate.²⁴ Tectonic shifts, such as the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, cannot be reversed through the single-handed intervention of even the most powerful country. States can, however, learn to mitigate the effects of their security rivalry. Specifically, in the realm of arms control, there are several policies the great powers can pursue to increase the odds of cooperation.

Policy Recommendations

Cooperation on arms control offers opportunities to mitigate the most poignant and dangerous aspects of the intense strategic and security confrontation between the U.S. and China. Both countries have vital interests in reducing the global nuclear risk and national spending on defense and arms race, particularly in the aftermath of a global pandemic. The most recent record shows that China is not interested in joining a trilateral arms control framework with the U.S. and Russia but still maintains an interest in being a part of international nonproliferation and arms control dialogues, as demonstrated in its virtual meetings with the EU and the IAEA on these topics. By being proactive and innovative, the U.S. can turn this interest into action. The U.S. should no longer pursue the former administration's agenda for creating a trilateral arms control treaty and forcing China into it. First, the Biden administration should initiate bilateral talks on arms control with China, showing a genuine interest in a mutually beneficial dialogue instead of conveniently bringing China into existing arms control frameworks. The vague statement made at the end of the Biden-Xi virtual summit about the importance of managing strategic risks was a good, albeit insufficient move.²⁵ Second, an arms control *treaty* between China and the United States is not the only option. Negotiating an arms control treaty following the decades of absence of communication and failed attempts in arms control is unlikely to produce any result. Third, given the disparity between the two arsenals, any attempt that enforces numerical reductions in Chinese nuclear arsenal will likely be dead on arrival. Therefore, an agreement with sufficient bilateral monitoring and verification should be pursued to build trust and to emphasize the vitality of transparency in nuclear proliferation efforts. Such an agreement should emphasize the two countries' role and interest in preventing possible nuclear misperception and miscalculations. Furthermore, moving to monitoring and verification processes upon successful agreement, the U.S. and China could guarantee that bilateral visits and exchanges will be conducted by teams of scientists, avoiding the presence of intelligence and government officials in nuclear sites and improving

²⁴ Eliza Gheorghe, "Proliferation and the Logic of the Nuclear Market," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2019), p. 88–127.

²⁵ "Readout of President Biden's Virtual Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China," *The White House* (16 November, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/11/16/readout-of-president-bidens-virtual-meeting-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

the transparency-security trade-off for both countries.

These measures do not offer a guarantee that the U.S. and the PRC will avert an arms race, but they can help attenuate the consequences of multipolarity and the intense security competition between Washington and Beijing. These policies rely on a framework of principles, pathways, and procedures that can get the United States and China to realize the danger that vertical proliferation poses to their very survival, and thus together make the first steps in the direction of arms control.