

# China's Nuclear Weapons and the Prospects for Multilateral Arms Control

The United States and Russia have engaged in negotiations to limit and reduce their respective nuclear arsenals for more than 40 years. The successful conclusion of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in 2010 marked the latest step in this process and, according to Pres. Barack Obama, set the stage for even more reductions.<sup>1</sup> In a June 2013 speech, the president in fact reaffirmed his intention to seek further negotiated cuts with Russia.

The other declared nuclear weapon states—China, France, India, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom—have so far not played a direct role in this process. Since the United States and Russia possess the largest and most diverse arsenals, comprising nearly 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, the more-modest nuclear capabilities of these other nations have heretofore had only a minimal effect on the overall strategic balance and notions of stability between the two nuclear superpowers.

That, however, may be changing. If the United States and Russia do indeed significantly lower their numbers of nuclear weapons in the years ahead, the relative proportion of nuclear capability represented by the other five countries could significantly increase. Such a development would have two important implications. First, it would raise the question of how the theories of nuclear deterrence, originally developed in a bilateral and Cold War context, will apply in an international system with several nations holding nuclear weapons numbering “in the hundreds.” It also suggests that the nuclear arsenals of the other nuclear weapon states will become an important factor in any future US-Russian discussions on nuclear reductions.

Officials in both the United States and Russia have already acknowledged that they will eventually need to address the other states in some form or fashion. In the United States, for example, the congressionally mandated bipartisan commission on the US strategic posture stated in 2009 that “in support of its arms control interests and interest in strategic stability more generally, the United States should pursue a much broader and more ambitious set of strategic dialogues with not just Russia but also China and US allies in both Europe and Asia.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, in giving its consent to ratification of the New START, the US Senate called upon “the other nuclear weapon states to give careful and early consideration to corresponding reductions of their own nuclear arsenals.”<sup>3</sup>

For their part, the Russians have raised the issue of so-called third country nuclear forces in the past, including as early as the negotiations leading to the 1972 SALT I treaty.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told attendees at an international conference on 8 November 2012 in Moscow, “further steps in the field of nuclear arms reduction and limitation must be multilateral.”<sup>5</sup> His comments also suggest that the United States and Russia may differ on the timing of including the other nuclear weapon states in any formal negotiations. Washington officials appear to believe that the two major nuclear powers should undertake one more round of reductions by themselves. Moscow officials, on the other hand, apparently prefer to involve the others sooner rather than later.

Even if the United States and Russia finally agree that the moment is right, it remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, the other nuclear weapon states are prepared to enter into discussions on strategic stability and ultimately on possible reductions in their respective nuclear arsenals. As one might imagine, the likely answers vary according to the policies and perceived national security needs of each country—and no two are alike.

### **Uncertainty Surrounds China’s Nuclear Forces**

The nation that looms largest in both US and Russian assessments of future deterrence requirements, as well as the wisdom of making any further nuclear reductions, is China. While the nuclear stockpiles of the two major powers dwarf that of China, the latter still has a significant and growing nuclear arsenal. Moreover, the United States and Russia—for very different reasons—view China as a strategic competitor and a potential threat to important security interests in the region. Consequently, neither Washington nor Moscow relishes the prospect of China achieving parity in terms of nuclear weapons. They clearly wish to avoid reducing their own nuclear arsenals to the level held by China or, alternatively, reducing their arsenals to a level that could eventually be matched by China through continued or even accelerated development of its own capabilities.

A central problem in assessing the likelihood of either outcome remains the significant uncertainty about the current and planned size of China’s nuclear forces. China has consistently held that it needs only enough nuclear weapons to deter nuclear attack and counter nuclear coercion. This purpose does not, according to Chinese writings, require that China necessarily match the major nuclear powers in terms of weapons. Indeed, China has repeatedly said that it has no intention of engaging in

a nuclear arms race with other nations. Rather, as Taylor Fravel and Evan Medeiros argue, Chinese nuclear doctrine appears instead to be guided by the principle of “assured retaliation,” wherein “a small number of survivable weapons would be enough to impose unacceptable damage in a retaliatory strike and thus deter nuclear aggression.”<sup>6</sup>

The current size of China’s nuclear arsenal would at first blush seem consistent with this interpretation. A 2013 Pentagon report to Congress on China’s military capabilities estimates that its land-based nuclear capabilities consist of between 50 and 75 silo and road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). It also notes that China “will likely continue to invest considerable resources to maintain a limited, but survivable, nuclear force . . . to ensure the PLA can deliver a damaging retaliatory nuclear strike.” To this end, China is likely to, according to the report, further increase the number of its mobile ICBMs, begin operational patrols of its JIN-class submarines armed with the JL-2 sea-launched ballistic missiles, and develop countermeasures to US and other countries’ ballistic missile defense systems.<sup>7</sup> The Pentagon assessment does not offer data on the actual size of China’s nuclear warhead stockpile. However, nongovernmental analysts Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris have estimated that China currently possesses a total inventory of roughly 250 nuclear warheads.<sup>8</sup>

Not everyone agrees with these numbers. Russian specialists Alexei Arbatov and Vladimir Dvorkin, for example, assert that “the Chinese nuclear capability has been clearly underestimated by the international community.” They note that some Russian experts estimate that China has 800–900 nuclear weapons in its current stockpile available for rapid deployment and possibly an equal number in reserve or awaiting dismantlement. They also refer to foreign press accounts alleging that an extensive system of underground tunnels in China could be used to store large quantities of military hardware, including nuclear weapons.<sup>9</sup>

## **The No-First-Use Debate**

Beyond the question of the current and future size of China’s nuclear forces, another element of uncertainty concerns Chinese nuclear doctrine. Earlier this year, the Chinese government released its latest defense white paper. The new document predictably focused on areas of immediate concern to Beijing, including the widely publicized US “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific region and the increasingly fractious maritime disputes in the region.<sup>10</sup> Although the white paper did not dwell on China’s nuclear weapons policy, what it said—or, more to the point, did *not* say—on the topic drew an almost immediate reaction from Western observers.

Ever since it first tested nuclear weapons in 1964, China has professed that it will never be the first country to use them against any nuclear weapon state and that it will never use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against any nonnuclear weapon state or nuclear weapon-free zone. This so-called no-first-use pledge has become a routine staple of practically every official Chinese pronouncement on nuclear policy. Moreover, Chinese officials routinely criticize the United States and Russia for not explicitly declaring a no-first-use policy of their own and for allegedly retaining a “nuclear warfighting” posture, including the capability to conduct a first strike.

Yet, an explicit reference to the no-first-use policy was notably absent in the most recent Chinese defense white paper. In a *New York Times* op-ed, James Acton of the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ventured that the omission might reflect a change to China’s 50-year-old declaratory policy. He suggested that Beijing’s oft-repeated concerns about the potential threat posed by US ballistic missile defenses and conventional precision strike programs to Chinese nuclear retaliatory forces might be causing its defense community to re-think long-held assumptions about nuclear no-first-use.<sup>11</sup> In fact, several scholars contend that an internal debate along these lines did in fact take place in China in the mid 2000s.<sup>12</sup>

Other commentators were quick to challenge Acton’s conclusion. Perhaps the most interesting response came in an editorial by Maj Gen Yao Yunzhu of the Chinese Academy of Military Science—a widely known official spokesperson on Chinese nuclear policy.<sup>13</sup> She dismissed Acton’s conclusions, arguing instead that the break with past language resulted not from a change in policy, but from a change in the format of the white paper. In fact, the latest edition has a different title and a different structure than six previous iterations (dating from 2000 to 2010). Moreover, Yao argues that the limited language on nuclear policy within the latest white paper is consistent with a no-first-use doctrine and that recent statements by Chinese leaders voiced in other venues—including the April 2012 nuclear security summit in Seoul—confirm that it is still official policy.

Both sides to this debate have a point. Much of the language on nuclear doctrine in the latest white paper looks cribbed from earlier editions, particularly the 2008 version. Thus, Acton is right to question why this latest paper would copy that language but remove the explicit references to China’s no-first-use policy found in previous versions. Conversely, Yao is correct to point out that the other recent instances in which China has repeated its no-first-use pledge do little to support

the contention that the Chinese government has abruptly and indirectly abandoned its 50-year-old pledge.

Whatever the truth, the episode underscores the lingering suspicions in both US and Russian circles about China's long-term nuclear plans. If China is indeed having second thoughts about its no-first-use policy in light of developing US conventional military capabilities, it might also be considering a very different nuclear force than one predicated solely on an assured second-strike retaliatory capability.

### **Prospects for Multilateral Arms Control**

The uncertainty surrounding China's nuclear capabilities and doctrine have implications for future arms control measures involving the two largest nuclear powers. Until the United States and Russia can be more certain about where China's nuclear arsenal is, and where it is likely to go, critics in both countries will resist further reductions in their own arsenals, and strategic stability between all three countries will remain an area of concern.

US and Russian experts have repeatedly called for China to be more open about its current nuclear capabilities and future intentions. In a related vein, others have suggested that China, along with France and the United Kingdom, could voluntarily join the United States and Russia in disclosing information on their strategic nuclear forces in the manner spelled out in New START as a first step in enhancing transparency and building confidence.<sup>14</sup>

China, however, has historically been reluctant to discuss the size and characteristics of its nuclear forces, claiming that secrecy is essential to ensuring the survivability of its relatively small retaliatory force. As described by Major General Yao, "China depends more on uncertainty—not on certainty, not on transparency to deter . . . a certain amount of opaqueness is an integral part of China's no-first-use policy."<sup>15</sup> Thus, it seems unlikely China will agree in the near term to be more forthcoming, either through unilateral disclosures or through multilateral cooperative approaches.

Likewise, China does not appear the least bit interested at the moment in engaging in more formal discussions on ways to limit or reduce its own nuclear weapons. While Chinese official statements do envision future multilateral negotiations on nuclear arms reductions, they also attach certain preconditions. For example, an earlier defense white paper (2010) stated that "countries possessing the largest nuclear arsenals bear special and primary responsibility for nuclear disarmament. They should further drastically reduce their nuclear arsenals . . . so as to create

the necessary conditions for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.” And, before this can take place, “all nuclear-weapon states should abandon any nuclear deterrence policy based on first use of nuclear weapons.”<sup>16</sup> Since there is little likelihood of either of these conditions being met, the prospects for China engaging—on either a bilateral or multilateral basis—in official dialogue on nuclear reductions or strategic stability likewise seem remote at the moment.

### **Some Encouraging Signs . . .**

Still, there are some indications that China feels a need to respond, at least in a limited way, to the pressure exerted by others for greater openness regarding its nuclear capabilities and policies. Over the past several years, former officials, technical experts, and academics from the United States and China have met in a number of “Track 2” dialogues sponsored by the US National Academy of Sciences, the CSIS Pacific Forum, the Naval Postgraduate School, the Carnegie Endowment, and other nongovernmental organizations. While these are unofficial venues, they nevertheless play a useful role in promoting a better understanding of national positions, which can in turn help inform policymakers. For example, in 2008, the US Committee on International Security and Arms Control and the Chinese Scientists Group on Arms Control jointly produced an English-Chinese glossary on nuclear security terms.<sup>17</sup> The open and candid discussions during this exercise helped shed additional light on the similarities and, in some case, the very real differences between US and Chinese perceptions of fundamental concepts associated with nuclear deterrence theory and practice.

In addition to active Track 2 efforts, there has been a noticeable uptick in the number of official visits and military-to-military exchanges during the past two years. For example, in September of this year, Gen Mark Welsh became the first US Air Force chief of staff to visit China in 15 years.<sup>18</sup> Official Chinese representatives have also participated in a number of high-profile international conferences on nuclear policy and arms control—including the US Strategic Command’s inaugural deterrence symposium and the 2013 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference.

Finally, China appears to be showing greater interest in playing a somewhat more visible and constructive role in multilateral arms control discussions. In 2012, it agreed to lead a working group of the five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council in developing a glossary of terms to facilitate further P5 discussions on nuclear matters.<sup>19</sup> And in August of this year, the Chinese government finally agreed to provide limited data from its monitoring stations to the International

Data Center of the Vienna-based Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization—although China has yet to ratify the treaty.<sup>20</sup>

### **... But Far from Ideal**

While these are encouraging developments, China remains comparatively opaque with respect to its nuclear capabilities and doctrine. As long as this is the case, the United States and Russia will continue to harbor doubts about the current state—much less the future direction—of China's nuclear program. Building political support for substantial further reductions of their respective nuclear arsenals will thus be a hard sell in both countries.

Similarly, the prospect of formal discussions with China on strategic stability and nuclear arms control will remain a distant prospect regardless of what US and Russian officials may ultimately desire. In addition to China's stated position that the two nuclear superpowers must go much lower before it will countenance multilateral nuclear arms control discussions, China's secretive approach is a huge obstacle to meaningful talks. As the United States and Russia learned through many years of practical experience, the process demands a fair degree of information sharing and transparency, both in the negotiation stage and in the actual implementation of agreements. China is simply not ready for that yet. Thus, if further nuclear reductions are to take place, they will most likely occur only in the framework of another round of bilateral negotiations between Washington and Moscow.

For now, the best one can hope for is that China's apparent greater willingness to engage in official dialogue and military-to-military exchanges will ultimately lead to more openness about its nuclear capability doctrine. This is far from ideal, and the other nuclear weapon states should use every opportunity to remind China of that fact.

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## Notes

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