

Engaging China on Multilateral Arms Control

Future efforts to maintain and strengthen multilateral arms control will have to take China into account. Beijing has abandoned its previous restraint and is actively shaping the global security order of the 21st century. It sees itself as a global player, a trading power, a major power in Asia, and the world's largest developing country, although it would be more accurate to say it is a country that has been developing rapidly.

With China's constructive participation, it will be much easier to manage challenges to international arms control and the international order, such as those posed by Iran and North Korea. Efforts to further develop the multilateral arms control architecture also will be more effective and sustainable if Beijing is on board.

In August, China's growing importance and more assertive stance on arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation became abundantly

clear at the 10th review conference of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), where it pursued its own interests and significantly shaped the meeting's agenda. China highlighted its concerns about the nuclear submarine cooperation among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It opposed any increased commitments on nuclear transparency and successfully rebuffed calls for a fissile material moratorium that could impinge on its own nuclear arms buildup.

The Chinese style of disarmament diplomacy was often tenuous and uncompromising. Even so, the four-week-long review conference also demonstrated that Chinese arms control and disarmament policies no longer can be simply equated with those of Russia. On some issues, such as criticism of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, the positions of Moscow and Beijing overlapped. Nevertheless, China did not provide political cover for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Review conference President Gustavo Zlauvinen said later that he was under the impression that "there was no overall strategic coordination" between China and Russia in New York. He described how, on the conference's penultimate day, China "let go" of its objection to language on transparency and reporting on nuclear arsenals in order to pave the way for a draft final outcome document.¹ Even if China was ready to accept the compromise language, it could not prevent Russia from standing in the way of consensus.² The review conference ended in disagreement, with Beijing calling this failure "regrettable."³

In early November, during German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping confirmed

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Under President Xi Jinping, shown here at the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in October, China has evinced some ambivalent policies on arms control and nonproliferation. Even so, future efforts to strengthen multilateral arms control will have to take China into account. (Photo by Lintao Zhang/Getty Images)

Chinese concerns about a possible nuclear escalation over Ukraine. Xi said that the world should “advocate that nuclear weapons cannot be used, a nuclear war cannot be waged, in order to prevent a nuclear crisis” in Eurasia, the strongest Chinese warning against nuclear use directed at Russia.⁴

Engagement on arms control with China is also necessary because it is no longer possible to relegate China to the level of a second-rate military power. By 2050, China aims to have military forces that are technologically on par with those of the United States. Beijing is developing a broad arsenal of state-of-the-art weapons systems, making technological leaps in development, becoming increasingly active as an arms exporter, and initiating sophisticated defense cooperation programs, for example, with Pakistan and Russia. An unconstrained Chinese military build-up with the consequence of new arms races is highly destabilizing and costly. As a result, any progress on engaging China in cooperative efforts to control and reduce military potentials is valuable in and of itself.

Arms control with China mostly has been discussed from the perspective of

dialogue between itself and the United States, the two main global competitors, but U.S. efforts to engage China have had limited success. Some bilateral dialogue forums came to a halt during the Trump administration, and efforts to restart them mostly have flopped. It is therefore imperative to broaden the discussion. Engaging China in efforts to advance multilateral arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation efforts matters not only to the United States but to all states with a vested interest in preserving global arms control arrangements.

Countries around the world are struggling to deal with Russia’s turn against multilateral arms control across the board. Moscow is shedding arms limitations and increasingly misusing global regimes to promote false narratives and deepen divides within the international community. Its ultimate goal is to undercut the broad global rejection of the war against Ukraine. Against this dire background, Chinese support and engagement is a necessary precondition to keep the norms against weapons of mass destruction intact and multilateral disarmament and nonproliferation regimes afloat. Achieving that outcome

will require that, in addition to the United States, countries that are not seen as China’s strategic competitors also pursue constructive dialogues with China on multilateral arms control.

Keeping It Simple

Four guidelines could improve the likelihood of successful multilateral arms control engagement with China. First, an arms control dialogue should be kept as separate as possible from discussions on other security issues. Chinese involvement in multilateral, regional, and bilateral agreements to limit military capabilities, for example, those that could spread to third countries, has merit in and of itself. Such cooperation can contribute to a long-term positive change in the political relationships between China and other countries that support arms control, establish channels of communication, and foster awareness of shared interests.

Second, engagement should be as issue specific as possible. The field of disarmament and arms control has evolved and become so multifaceted and differentiated that the general demand for Chinese involvement rings hollow. Although interconnections between

topics cannot be completely ignored, for example, with regard to issues involving disarmament and nonproliferation, there is a risk of weighing down talks with too many linkages.

Third, proposals for talks should begin with topics on which China's understanding of its role in multilateral arms control is ambivalent. China wants to leverage its nuclear weapons, yet remains interested in preventing nuclear war. It wants to reduce the risk of military escalation over conflicts involving the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea but also wants to maintain its political and economic influence in the Middle East and East Asia. China sees arms control accords that focus on the humanitarian consequences of weaponry, such as anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions, as a means to build bridges with countries of the global South. Even so, it does not want to renounce possession of such weapons, at least while its main competitors retain them. For countries interested in engaging China, it is worth exploring the gaps between these competing goals.

Finally, Beijing's participation and involvement in informal groups of states discussing specific arms control challenges, such as the International Partnership for Disarmament Verification, should be encouraged. Given military power disparities and distrust among major powers, China's lack of experience in arms control, and the closed nature of the Chinese political system, the level of ambition of any engagement with China on multilateral arms control initially will have to be low. Technical discussions in cross-regional groups, for example, on nuclear risk reduction or verification, could be a way of bypassing currently unresolvable political issues that stand in the way of engaging China on arms control.

Avoiding Pitfalls

It is important to be realistic about China's participation in arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament initiatives. China wants to be treated as an equal with its main competitor, the United States. China is not ready for agreements that impose constraints on its arms policy without the United States being subject to similar provisions.

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Thus, China has rejected participation in the Russian-U.S. nuclear arms control process and is likely to continue to do so as long as there is a significant gap between its nuclear capabilities and those of the two biggest nuclear possessor states.⁵ China believes that U.S. missile defenses, the possible deployment of U.S. intermediate-range missile systems, and advanced U.S. conventional weapons in Asia put its nuclear second-strike capability at risk. Fu Cong, director-general of the department of arms control at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, argues that "under all these circumstances, you can't expect China to be both transparent in doctrine and transparent in numbers."⁶

Beijing also is dragging its feet regarding arrangements on militarily applicable technologies that it wants to use for an asymmetric arms build-up against the United States. For example, China has a technological lead over the United States on hypersonic weapons systems and therefore is unlikely to sit down to discuss transparency measures, let alone limits. Unsurprisingly, the result is a destabilizing and dangerous arms race in these systems.⁷

China does not support or is reluctant to support regional approaches to confidence- and security-building measures or arms control if these run counter to its aspirations for regional supremacy. Compounding the problem is the fact that any efforts at regional arms control would have little on which to build. Regional arms control scarcely exists in Asia, and regional decision-makers are often unaware of the usefulness of arms control as a stabilizing instrument. Mutual security perceptions are driven by worst-case scenarios.

Furthermore, China remains deeply skeptical about governance approaches for the regulation of novel technologies, such as information or space technologies,

that can be used for civilian and military purposes. By contrast, many Western countries believe that effective rules and regulations for such dual-use technologies would need to be based on cooperation between governments and civil society, as well as private sector actors. In Beijing's view, codes of conduct or attempts to operationalize international legal standards for arms control could amount to "interference in the internal affairs" of the country. China promotes a traditional—some would say outdated—concept of disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation, based on legally binding intergovernmental agreements that are implemented and verified with minimal invasiveness.

For example, China and Russia have proposed a treaty on the prevention of the placement of weapons in outer space to prohibit an arms race there. Western countries, however, have criticized the proposal for being based on the concept of regulating objects, rather than providing generic rules of the road to prevent military misuse. They argue that the Chinese-Russian approach is no longer appropriate and are pushing for an agreement that would set norms for responsible behaviors in space. Such differences also characterize multilateral discussions on regulations to prevent the military misuse of information technology and artificial intelligence.

Straddling Contradictions

China is a latecomer to multilateral arms control, having begun to intensify its involvement in such treaties and regimes in the mid-1980s during the country's economic opening. Ten years later, China largely had caught up with the arms control mainstream. Today, it is a signatory to all major multilateral regimes for the control of weapons of mass destruction and also party to other arms control treaties.

As other states do, China is trying to influence political discussions in multilateral institutions by filling senior posts with national staff. Overall, it still is underrepresented, having held only 13 top postings in UN specialized agencies since assuming its UN Security Council seat in 1971. Of the five permanent council members, only Russia has assumed fewer senior positions while the United States has held five times as many. China has “yet to lead an agency with a remit directly addressing international peace and security.”⁸ Nevertheless, Chinese influence is growing, and Beijing would appear to be attempting to politically “guide” UN staff possessing Chinese passports more closely than in the past.

Although China’s policy on disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation is guided by clear principles, its actions are by no means cast from a single mold. Conflicts between objectives and a fractured understanding of its role sometimes result in ambivalence or inconsistency. For example, China has an interest in strong nonproliferation regimes to minimize proliferation risks that could endanger stability, especially in regions where it has strong economic ties. For China, being part of the Iranian nuclear negotiations with France, Germany, Russia, the UK, the United States, and the European Union and part of the six-party talks with North Korea has the added benefit of giving it equal footing with other major powers.

Yet, there is friction between Beijing’s support for nonproliferation and its geopolitical power claims and economic interests, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. Sometimes it views potential or real proliferators as difficult regional partners; other times it sees them as useful allies in its broader geopolitical competition with the United States. China’s support for Pakistan illustrates the ambivalence or duplicity of its nonproliferation policy. China has tolerated and even encouraged Pakistan’s development into a nuclear weapons possessor by sharing nuclear weapons-related information. China views Pakistan as a counterweight to its regional competitor India. Even today, China is supplying civilian nuclear technology to Pakistan, which, like India, is not party to the NPT.

Such an incongruous policy can have implications for multilateral arms control. For decades, Pakistan has been blocking the start of negotiations on a treaty prohibiting the production of weapons-grade fissile material at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. Islamabad ostensibly has conditioned its consent on including New Delhi’s stockpiles of fissile material in any future treaty, but many observers wonder whether Beijing may be encouraging such stonewalling to prevent future limits on its own nuclear weapons.

China wants to avoid a military, especially nuclear, escalation of the conflict between North Korea and the United States. Yet, it also props up the North Korean regime whose collapse could lead to a unified Korea allied with Washington. Beijing at times has supported international sanctions against Pyongyang, but implemented them inadequately.

China’s self-perception in arms control regimes also fluctuates between its claim to regional hegemony and its traditional role as a developing country. China’s historical experience as a victim of Western, especially Japanese, aggression, including the horrendous use of biological and chemical weapons by Japan against China from the early 1930s until 1945, has left a lasting mark on Chinese attitudes toward arms control. As

a result, China has long criticized the NPT as discriminatory, arguing that the United States and Soviet Union saw the treaty as an instrument to prevent it and other countries from fully developing a nuclear arsenal. It was only in 1990 that Beijing took part in an NPT review conference for the first time and two years later that it acceded to the NPT.

Today, China’s positions on the NPT range between siding with those of the Non-Aligned Movement, which primarily represents the interests of non-nuclear-weapon states from the global South, and embracing its privileged role as a nuclear-weapon state formally recognized under the NPT. This dichotomy is underscored by the fact that when Beijing operates in multilateral forums outside of regional groupings, it refers to itself as the “group of one.”

In recent years, China has increased the size and diversity of its nuclear arsenal,⁹ yet it declares itself in favor of a world free of nuclear weapons and repeatedly asserts that it does not want to be involved in a nuclear arms race. China is the only NPT nuclear-weapon state to have adopted a nuclear no-first-use policy and advocates that other nuclear weapons possessors adopt a similar policy. Despite such disarmament rhetoric, Beijing has aligned itself with the other



As a participant in multilateral nuclear negotiations on Iran and North Korea, China has benefited by being treated as equal to other major powers. Here, China’s envoy to the United Nations and other international organizations in Vienna, Wang Qun, speaks with reporters in 2021 after a meeting on the 2015 Iran deal.

(Photo by Georges Schneider/Xinhua via Getty Images)

nuclear-weapon states in rejecting calls for a comprehensive ban on nuclear weapons and in opposing the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Like all other nuclear-weapon possessors, China did not participate as an observer at the June 2022 conference of TPNW states-parties.

China feels comfortable in the company of other nuclear-weapon states on other issues too. It has the lead among them in developing a joint glossary on nuclear terminology and coordinates the nuclear-weapon states' dialogue with members of the nuclear-weapon-free zone in Southeast Asia. China frequently and proudly refers to the January 2022 statement in which the five nuclear-weapon states agreed that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."¹⁰

There also are incongruities in Beijing's policies on chemical and biological weapons control issues. China has been a party in good standing to the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention since the treaty entered into force. It has declared and dismantled its chemical weapons program in conformity with the convention's rules, and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) conducts routine inspections in China without any major problems.

Yet, China backs Russia in the United Nations and in OPCW decision-making bodies in protecting Syria from the consequences of its repeated use of chemical weapons. China and Russia have wielded their UN Security Council vetoes to prevent referral of the investigation into chemical weapons attacks in Syria to the International Criminal Court. Beijing has opposed new OPCW powers to investigate chemical weapons attacks. It also has voted against funding a new Investigation and Identification Team in the regular OPCW budget, arguing that such funding would give the OPCW investigative powers beyond the intergovernmental sphere.

China's behavior as a member of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) is similarly incongruous. It supports calls by many nonaligned states for resuming talks on a BWC verification protocol. Since 2016, China has been working within the BWC framework to improve international cooperation on security-relevant research



China is expanding its nuclear weapons stockpile and growing in importance on arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation challenges. This Dongfeng-41 intercontinental ballistic missile, paraded through Beijing in 2019, is a major addition to its arsenal.

(Photo by Lan Hongguang/Xinhua via Getty Images)

and with Pakistan and Brazil produced a proposal titled "The Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists," which received wide support among BWC states-parties.¹¹

This engagement stands in stark contrast to Chinese support for baseless accusations by Russia that biosecurity laboratories funded by Western countries in Ukraine and elsewhere are being used for prohibited biological weapons activities. In October 2021, Beijing and Moscow jointly argued that "overseas military biological activities" by the United States and its allies "cause serious concerns and questions among the international community over its compliance with the BWC" and "pose serious risks for the national security" of China and Russia.¹²

China's understanding of its role in humanitarian arms control, which aims to reduce the human suffering caused by particularly gruesome types of weapons, is also somewhat ambivalent. It appears open to the humanitarian perspective, but rejects the norms-based approach adopted in relevant treaties. As with other permanent UN Security Council members, Beijing also is unhappy that states have agreed on new humanitarian arms control accords by evading the consensus principle.

This ambivalent attitude likely is an attempt to improve China's political standing vis-à-vis countries of the global South without assuming any disarmament obligations. The result is that China has not signed the 1999 Convention on

the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, which bans most landmines, or the 2010 Convention on Cluster Munitions, which bans cluster munitions. Nevertheless, China attends meetings of states-parties to both treaties as an observer and supports key principles in the accords, such as the one asserting that states responsible for use of cluster munitions are responsible for clearing them.

Engaging China

Arms control engagement should focus first on such gaps, ambivalences, and contradictions in China's arms control policies. Even if Beijing holds some of its disarmament positions for opportunistic or propagandistic reasons, taking it at its word could ease the way for dialogue.

Wherever possible, this kind of pragmatic approach should aim to separate dialogue on arms control from the overall geopolitical rivalry. Talking about nuclear risk reduction and nuclear disarmament as "global goods" benefiting the entire world may be more persuasive than framing arms control as a tool to restrain military competition. This is particularly true for countries that see China not only as a rival and competitor, but also as a partner.

In his November 2021 talks with Xi, U.S. President Joe Biden seemed to imply that Washington supports separating arms control from the broader competition. Biden "underscored the importance of

managing strategic risks” and emphasized “the need for common-sense guardrails to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict and to keep lines of communication open.”¹³ This approach appears to be more promising than the crude and heavy-handed demands of Biden’s predecessor that Beijing join trilateral nuclear talks with Moscow and Washington. It would also be in line with U.S. policy to seek dialogue with China on transnational challenges such as climate change and health security.¹⁴

Discussions on technical issues, such as verification, could be one good starting point. China has comparatively little experience in this important aspect of arms control, but has shown some interest in it.¹⁵ From 2014 to 2017, China participated with Russia as an observer in the first phase of the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification, where more than 25 nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states discussed procedures to jointly verify nuclear disarmament. Beijing stopped participating during the Trump administration. Bringing Chinese experts back into this dialogue could be one way to tackle “China’s traditional belief in the top-down approach of trust-building.”¹⁶

Cooperation on implementing positive obligations under multilateral arms control agreements might be another engagement avenue. This could include joint work on the peaceful use of certain technologies or in the humanitarian area. Such cooperation could appeal to China’s proclaimed affinity for positions of the countries of the global South. The EU and Germany support cooperative initiatives in manifold ways, such as in the control and destruction of small arms and light weapons.

Nuclear risk reduction is a third challenge on which intensified Chinese engagement should be sought. Even before Russia’s nuclear threats in the context of its war against Ukraine, the topic had received attention among NPT member states. One venue for such discussions could be the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament Initiative, a group of about 40 nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states that is conducting informal talks on nuclear disarmament-related matters. China has participated since the United States launched the group in 2018.

Within this initiative, nuclear risk reduction is the focus of a working group co-chaired by Finland and Germany.

None of these recommendations will lead immediately to restrictions on China’s growing military capabilities. Nevertheless, even low-threshold dialogues can help establish channels of discussion, provide insights into the formation of Chinese opinion and decision-making, and in this manner prepare the ground for the eventual initiation of dialogue at the formal level at a later stage. That would be no small achievement given current conditions of global geopolitical competition.

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