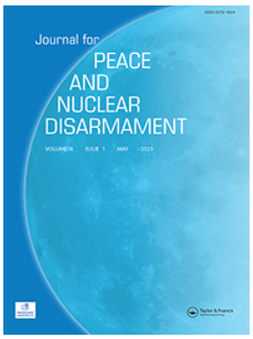

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Getting Past No: Developing a Nuclear Arms Control Relationship with China

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ABSTRACT

How can the United States get past the Chinese "no" to engaging on nuclear arms control? What can and should the United States do in the immediate to short term to lay the groundwork for arms control negotiations with China to begin? This paper reviews the origins and evolution of US-China nuclear relations and the history of China's perceptions of, and approach to, nuclear arms control, and the restraint regimes more generally. On that basis, it reflects on several first steps that the United States can and should take now to try and develop an arms control relationship with China. The paper argues that developing such a relationship will take time but that taking these, or some of these, steps now is important.

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Introduction

The United States worries deeply about China, which is, per the US Department of Defense, its "pacing challenge" (US Department of Defense 2021, 1). US concerns about China are wide-ranging and thus include a dimension which, for a long time, Washington largely ignored when thinking about Beijing: the nuclear dimension. That dimension is now a major US focus, especially since new evidence surfaced in 2021 suggesting that China is engaged in a significant build-up of its nuclear forces and making rapid advances on other key strategic developments and deployments. It is in that spirit that General Mark Millet, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has recently characterized such a nuclear build-up as no less than "one of the largest shifts in global geostrategic power that the world has witnessed" (Cronk 2021).

In that context, it is no surprise that the United States has exhibited increasing interest in developing a nuclear arms control relationship with China, i.e. a relationship regulated by agreements on strategic nuclear behavior and capabilities, as has been the case of the US-Russia (and before that the US-Soviet) relationship since at least the 1960s. So far, however, Chinese officials have rejected any form of engagement on nuclear arms control with the United States. Right now, in other words, there is no such thing as a US-China nuclear arms control relationship.

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How did the current situation emerge? What have been the key dynamics and drivers leading up to it? How does China view and approach nuclear arms control, generally, and with the United States in particular, and how have these perceptions and approach evolved over time? What, on that basis, can and should the United States do to try and set up a process that will get China on the path to accepting nuclear arms control? How, plainly, can the United States get past the Chinese "no" to engaging on nuclear arms control?

This paper seeks to provide answers to these vexing questions. It begins with a review of the origins and evolution of US-China nuclear relations to explain, in particular, why and how the United States went from what this author calls an "ignore-China" policy to an approach that has sought active engagement of China to develop an arms control relationship. The paper then moves on to analyze China's perceptions of, and approach to, nuclear weapons as a whole and, specifically, nuclear arms control, in and of itself and especially with the United States. Finally, based on the findings of the first two sections, the paper sketches out various options for the United States to jumpstart a process that could help develop a nuclear arms control relationship with China and, in closing, it examines its prospects for success in the immediate and foreseeable future as well as the strategic implications.

The paper's chief argument is that the US-China nuclear relationship will get worse before it gets better but that there is nonetheless a pathway to ameliorate that relationship and, down the line, i.e. not in the immediate but in the more distant future, reach agreements that will limit or, better, reduce US and Chinese strategic forces.

On the Origins and Evolution of US-China Nuclear Relations

For a long time, the United States did not pay attention to "nuclear China". So much so that at the turn of the century one analyst lamented that the US national security community treated China as "little more than a footnote in the history of the nuclear era", adding a few years later that it was an "afterthought" in US thinking (Roberts 2001, ES2; 2009, 33).

Well into the 2000s, only a handful of analysts were pressing Washington to start focusing on this "forgotten nuclear power" because, they stressed, "over the next decade it will likely be China, not Russia or any rogue, whose nuclear weapons policy will concern America most" (Brad, Manning, and Montaperto 2000, 53).

By the early 2020s, these analysts had been proven largely right; by then the United States had become deeply concerned about "nuclear China" and, as a result, was eager to develop a nuclear arms control relationship with it.

The Past is Not Prologue

The history of US-China nuclear relations mirror developments in broader bilateral interactions. Analyzing these relations, therefore, should be conducted against this backdrop.

US-China Relations, a Brief History Until the 2010s

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the United States sought to contain the new Chinese regime. Washington was convinced that China, as its Soviet ally, was an expansionist power that would threaten its non-communist neighbors. That belief was reinforced by China's support for the Soviet-backed North Korean People's Army after its invasion of South Korea, and by crises over Taiwan.[1]

The US containment strategy translated into the deployment of US forces to Asia and the establishment of bilateral alliances (with the Philippines, South Korea, the Nationalist government of Taiwan, and Japan) as well as multilateral security arrangements, such as the Australia-New Zealand-United States Security Treaty and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. Washington also urged allies to refrain from entering diplomatic relations with Beijing, and it placed an embargo on China and prevented Americans from visiting the country.

US-China relations began to change in the 1960s, however. Washington wanted Chinese support to end the war in Vietnam and was interested in terminating the increasingly fraught Sino-Soviet relationship. Beijing, for its part, wanted support to resist Soviet pressure. This convergence of interests led to the normalization of US-China relations in the late 1970s, terminating the US containment strategy and replacing it with an approach best described as "engage-but-hedge" (Friedberg 2018, 11).

After normalization, the United States began to engage China in all areas, and these efforts grew rapidly, especially after Beijing's "reform and opening" policies in the 1980s. By the 2010s, the United States and China were deeply interconnected.

Still, the United States never embraced China without restraint. The United States worked hard to maintain a favorable balance of power in Asia by keeping its forward-deployed forces, preserving and, whenever possible, strengthening its alliances, remaining committed to Taiwan, and concluding new partnerships. For good reasons: in addition to Beijing's decision to suppress the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, several crises emerged, notably over Taiwan in 1995–1996, after a US aircraft bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and when a Chinese fighter collided with a US reconnaissance aircraft over Hainan Island in 2001. Issues over human rights, proliferation, and trade also remained, and Beijing's military modernization, which seemed to grow faster as its economy prospered, was a major concern.

The United States, then, was hedging, hoping that engagement would eventually pay off, i.e. transform China into a power that accepted the established regional and international orders, endorsed market forces, and implemented democratic reforms, as had been the case for most of the Communist world after the Cold War.

US-China Nuclear Relations, a Brief History Until the 2010s

Mirroring broader bilateral interactions, the United States was at first deeply worried by the prospect of China going nuclear. Washington was especially concerned because the Soviet Union had initially agreed to provide nuclear assistance to China and because the

[1]During the Second World War, the United States supported the Chinese Nationalists and thus recognized them as the "true leaders" of China when they relocated to Taiwan after their defeat against the Communists in 1949.

Chinese arsenal was meant to be both a national asset and, as one analyst explained, "a contribution to the socialist camp's collective deterrent capability" (Goldstein 2000, 111).

Washington, however, quickly realized that Sino-Soviet nuclear cooperation never materialized because Moscow was concerned about Beijing going nuclear as well. US officials, then, tried to prevent Beijing from reaching its goal by advancing arms control and nonproliferation agreements and even by exploring military options against the Chinese program, including with the Soviets (Burr and Richelson 2000).

Yet a few years after Beijing tested its first atomic device in 1964, the United States determined that it could live with a nuclear China, for several reasons. One was the realization that Beijing had neither the ability nor, seemingly, the willingness to engage in nuclear competition. China seemingly wanted nuclear weapons only to prevent nuclear coercion and deter nuclear attack. Chairman Mao Zedong said as much and, significantly, he opted for a small nuclear arsenal, just enough to conduct a counterstrike, and developed forces based on missiles rather than gravity bombs (missiles are better suited for counterstrikes), maintained a de-mated force posture (evidence that it was not interested in nuclear warfighting), and adopted a no-first-use policy (Fravel 2019, 236–269; Lewis 2007). The other reason that led US officials to determine that the United States could live with a nuclear China was the belief that the benefits of US-China rapprochement outweighed the costs of confrontation.

Washington, plainly, concluded that its primary adversary was the Soviet Union and that it was better off with China on its side, especially after Beijing chose to direct its nuclear arsenal primarily against the Soviet Union, not the United States.

Accordingly, as it began to engage (while also hedging against) Beijing from the 1960s, Washington gradually adopted, de facto, an "ignore-China" policy when it came to nuclear weapons. In other words, Washington chose not to pay much attention to the Chinese nuclear weapons program. That policy, of course, was not meant to last forever but took deep roots in US national security circles and became the default approach for the reasons mentioned above (notably the deemed low-level nuclear threat posed by China) and, after the Cold War, because Beijing began to endorse many multilateral arms control and nonproliferation agreements, even showing an apparent interest in cooperating to try and solve proliferation crises.[2]

To the United States, then, China was not a nuclear problem and developing a nuclear (arms control) relationship with it appeared moot.

Shift to Interest, Then Priority

US concerns about China, writ large and specifically with regards to its military – notably nuclear – modernization, began to grow (again) in the late 2000s. US policy took time to adapt, however, and ended up changing almost overnight.

US Concerns (Re-)Emerge in the Late 2000s, but Longstanding Policy Remains

After the Great Recession of 2007–2009, which weakened the West but did not affect China, Beijing slowed democratic and economic reforms and became increasingly

[2]In 1965, Morton Halperin made clear that the United States should not be concerned by a nuclear China right now and in the short term. He stressed, however, that this would likely change in the long term (Halperin 1965, 86).

assertive on the world stage. Beijing tightened the screws in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and increased pressure on Taiwan. Beginning in 2009, it also became combative over its maritime and territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. Then, under Xi Jinping's leadership starting in 2012, these dynamics intensified. China became outrightly authoritarian at home, backtracked on economic reforms, and sought to reshape the international order in its image. After seizing the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines, Beijing began militarizing the South China Sea, establishing control of much of that space quickly. In 2013, it launched the Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious infrastructure program targeting primarily the Indo-Pacific and designed to benefit Chinese state-owned enterprises and gain political influence in host countries (and, in the future, potentially use these infrastructures for military purposes). Beijing also pushed its interests in multilateral institutions, against the rules of the World Trade Organization or the human rights regime.

These developments took place against the backdrop of a rapid Chinese military modernization program, including in the nuclear domain. Granted, even though much remained secret (because Beijing rejected transparency), the Chinese nuclear arsenal was still much smaller than the US (and Russian) arsenals; it was then estimated to include approximately 190 warheads, compared to approximately 6,000 each for the United States and Russia (Kristensen and Norris 2013). Still, Chinese nuclear modernization raised concerns as China was the only permanent member of the United Nations Security Council to perfect and expand its arsenal, leading to questions as to whether it sought to abandon its longstanding minimum deterrence posture and no-first-use policy, and attain numerical parity with the United States and Russia, which Beijing denied (Wheeler 2012).[3]

These concerns were magnified by China's refusal to engage in nuclear dialogue with the United States, which Washington began to propose regularly. The United States began to bring up the idea of a US-China nuclear dialogue in the 2000s. Significantly, there was a presidential summit commitment to launching such a dialogue in April 2006, but it was never honored by the Chinese side.

Accordingly, it became increasingly clear that the US strategy to transform China had failed. US policy vis-à-vis China did not change immediately, however, for two reasons: because the United States had other priorities ("loose nukes" after the Cold War, rogue states with nuclear-weapon ambitions, and nuclear security, especially after the September 11 attacks) and because it assumed that China was part of the solution to address these problems and therefore felt it was inappropriate to "push" Beijing too hard to get a "yes" to engaging in dialogue.[4] Still, while the United States continued its engage-but-hedge strategy, it stopped "ignoring" China, responding, for instance, with its "pivot" to Asia.

[3]To be sure, some had expressed concerns about China much earlier. For instance, in 1998, a Select Committee established by the US House of Representatives and led by US Representative Christopher Cox found that China had conducted covert operations within the United States during the 1980s and 1990s to enhance its nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles and other weapons of mass destruction (US Select Committee 1999).

[4]For good reasons: China, for instance, helped conclude the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to address Iran's nuclear program.

US Policy Changes from the Mid-2010s

The United States changed its stance vis-à-vis China in 2017, declaring it, along with Russia, a "revisionist power" in its *National Security Strategy* and other key strategic reviews, and stressing that strategic competition was now the primary organizing principle of the bilateral relationship (White House 2017, 25).[5] US-China relations subsequently deteriorated, in all areas. Tensions skyrocketed over trade, technology, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and values and human rights, as the United States became critical of Beijing's trade practices (and imposed tariffs on China), control over and theft of technology, bullying of regional countries (notably US regional allies and partners), authoritarian style at home, treatment of its minorities (especially in Xinjiang), and handling of the protests in Hong Kong.

US-China competition gathered more steam with the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The pandemic, which began in late 2019, quickly became a catalyst for growing US-China rivalry as Washington and Beijing quickly came to disagree over where (and how) the virus emerged and over the effectiveness and appropriateness of their response (Gill 2020). Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 further sank US-China relations as Beijing refused to condemn (let alone sanction) Moscow and largely blamed Washington for the war, leading many in the West to worry about growing convergence between China and Russia (which never stopped growing since the 1990s) and the possibility of China emulating Russia by making good on its threat to invade and take over Taiwan (Glaser 2022; Lin and Culver 2022).

In that context, Beijing's announcement in 2017 that it would jumpstart an overhaul of its military to develop "world-class forces" by 2049 was especially concerning.[6] To be sure, Beijing insisted that this overhaul would not affect its approach to nuclear weapons, which it said it would keep to minimum numbers and maintain under a no-first-use policy.[7] Yet Chinese nuclear warheads kept going – they are now believed to be 350—and the discovery, revealed publicly by independent organizations in 2021, of hundreds of missile silos in China, plus mounting evidence that Beijing was close to having an effective nuclear triad, adapted its posture to embrace nuclear warfighting more clearly, and gained considerable strength in and across multiple domains – conventional, space, and cyber – seemed to tell another story (Kristensen Hans and Korda 2021; Warrick 2021).[8] If nuclear parity with (let alone superiority over) the United States and Russia remained out of reach for China, Beijing still appeared committed to reducing the gap and, at a minimum, attaining what one analyst called "strategic equivalency".[9]

The United States responded in two ways: new weapon projects and a new approach to arms control. The US decision in 2018 to, in the near term, modify a small number of existing submarine-launched ballistic missiles and, in the longer term, pursue a modern

[5]Similar language was used in the *National Defense Strategy* (2018), the *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018), and the *Missile Defense Review* (2019).

[6]Xi initially announced his intentions to jumpstart military reforms at the 2013 Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress. Four years later, he said that the people's armed forces should become "world-class forces" by mid-century (Saunders, Ding, and Scobell 2019).

[7]Discussions during track-2 and track-1.5 dialogues.

[8]Also, the first batch of evidence (there are several) suggesting that China may be engaged in a nuclear build-up emerged in June 2021 (Warrick 2021).

[9]Brad Roberts was the first to use this terminology in his edited volume (Roberts 2020, 5). The terminology denotes Chinese efforts to attain an equivalent level of force to the United States in an across military (and other) domains, not just in the nuclear realm.

nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile, was made primarily with Russia in mind, especially given Moscow's behavior since its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Yet, per US officials, China was also an important driver.[10]

Similarly, the US decision in 2019 to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was made in response to Russia's violation of the treaty, but also because of China. Case in point, upon withdrawing, the United States called for Russia *and* China to conclude a trilateral arms control agreement.[11] Subsequent US efforts to advance this idea (and then to engage in bilateral nuclear arms control negotiations with China) did not bear fruit. Beijing's response was, and to this day remains, a categorical "no" on the argument that the United States and Russia must lead on arms control because they have the largest nuclear arsenals; Beijing added that its military/nuclear modernization was merely a response to US actions against China.[12]

By the early 2020s, then, China was no longer a forgotten nuclear power for the United States (Santoro 2021b). Washington was no longer ignoring Beijing and developing a nuclear arms control relationship with it had become a priority. But China was not the sole US focus either. Russia remained a major concern, especially after its invasion of Ukraine, as was North Korea and, to a lesser extent, Iran.

On China and Nuclear Arms Control

In addition to background knowledge on US-China nuclear relations, understanding China's approach to nuclear weapons and arms control is essential to identify the realm of the possible with Beijing in this area. The record shows that Beijing initially rejected any form of arms control before becoming slightly more ambivalent towards it from the 1980s. Over the past decade, however, Beijing seems to have returned more squarely to its original stance that nuclear arms control is bad for China.

From Outright Rejection to Ambivalence

From the establishment of the PRC through to the 1980s, Beijing did not want to hear about arms control. It changed its approach thereafter, albeit with important limits.

China Considers Arms Control "A Big Fraud"

China formed views about nuclear weapons and arms control early on. In 1945, Mao suggested that nuclear weapons were just another form of conventional weapons. He said:

> The atom bomb is a paper tiger which the U.S. reactionaries use to scare people. It looks terrible, but in fact it isn't. Of course, the atom bomb is a weapon of mass destruction, but the outcome of a war is decided by the people, not by one or two new types of weapons (Zedong 1967, 100).

[10]Discussions during track-2 and track-1.5 dialogues.
[11]It was first mentioned in a tweet by US President Donald Trump on Dec. 3, 2018 (Trump 2018). The president repeated it in his 2019 State of the Union Address (Trump 2019).
[12]Two days after US President Trump's original tweet talking about US-Russia-China trilateral arms control, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement rejecting the idea (Shuang 2018).

He believed, then, that any sovereign state had a right to nuclear weapons. So was the logic behind China's decision to go nuclear. As Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai put it in the 1950s: "Since many countries are developing them, surely China has to do the same" (Enlai and Wenxuan 1990, 319).

Partly because the United States had conducted "nuclear blackmail and coercion" against China during the Korean War, Chinese leaders also came to consider nuclear weapons useful to support the world's "oppressed nations". In May 1960, Mao told the Algerian provisional government:

> The French can only see money, steel, and atom bombs . . . We don't have atom bombs and can only send you lesser guns. Ten years from now, when we have more steel and atom bombs, your situation will also be changed accordingly (Zedong and Wenxuan 1994, 420).

The US and Soviet reactions to China going nuclear further shaped Beijing's approach to arms control. After considering military options against the nascent Chinese nuclear program, Washington and Moscow pushed arms control hard. They negotiated the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT, 1963), the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT, 1968), and the Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT, 1974). While there were diverse motives for these agreements, a critical goal was to limit China's nuclear program. Had China signed the LTBT in 1963, for instance, it could not have conducted its first nuclear test the next year. Had it adhered to the TTBT, it could not have improved its nuclear weapons by testing.

These developments led China to insist that "peace-loving countries" had a right to develop nuclear weapons to break to "nuclear monopoly" and end the nuclear threats of the major powers. Upon conducting its first nuclear test, Beijing said that the LTBT was "a big fraud to fool the people of the world", adding that its goal was "to consolidate the nuclear monopoly held by the three nuclear powers and tie up the hands and feet of all peace-loving countries" (People's Republic of China 1964). In that spirit, Beijing later denounced the US-Soviet Strategic Arms Limitation Talks as "sham disarmament" (Garrett and Glaser 1995, 47).

These views had a longstanding influence on Chinese thinking. For instance, in 1978, ten years after the NPT was signed, Beijing said that "The so-called NPT is a conspiracy concocted by the USSR and the U.S. to maintain their monopoly" (Xinhua 1978, 2).

In sum, until then, China rejected arms control outrightly.

China Warms Up to Arms Control – With Important Limits

Chairman Deng Xiaoping's decision in the late 1970s to develop the Chinese economy and improve the Chinese people's living standards by "reforming and opening up" China set the country on a new path and, in the process, transformed Beijing's approach to nuclear weapons and arms control. Because, to succeed, the Deng revolution required a stable domestic environment and peaceful international context, China became more willing to cooperate with the outside world on political and security issues, including arms control.

China began to state its opposition to nuclear proliferation. In 1981, for instance, Yu Peiwen, the head of the Chinese delegation to the Conference on Disarmament, stated that "Like many other peace-loving countries, China does

not advocate or encourage nuclear proliferation" (Peiwen 1981). Ten years later, Chinese Premier Li Peng provided more clarity, stressing that "China's position is clear-cut, that is, China won't practice nuclear proliferation. Meanwhile, we are against the proliferation of nuclear weapons by any other country" (Xinhua 1979–1991, 3).[13]

Especially from the 1990s, China began to cooperate with the multilateral arms control regime. In 1984, it joined the International Atomic Energy Agency and brought a comprehensive safeguards agreement into force (1989); it subsequently brought into force an Additional Protocol (2002). China also acceded to the NPT in 1992 and agreed to its indefinite extension in 1995. Moreover, in the early 1990s, it helped negotiate the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (1996), which it signed but did not ratify, and to add to its 1984 endorsement of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, it signed and ratified the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (1993/1997).

China then went further, participating in deepening and expanding nonproliferation and nuclear security instruments, notably after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States, as well as in collective actions to address proliferation challenges in Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. To be sure, there was a significant delta between China's stated support for arms control and nonproliferation and its actual deeds, but its endorsement of much of the regime was nonetheless a major shift.

China, however, refused to enter agreements that would limit, let alone reduce, its nuclear arsenal and, on that argument that it had a much smaller arsenal, conditioned its willingness to do so on deep cuts in US and Russian forces. (The Chinese approach stands in sharp contrast with the UK and French approach. Neither the United Kingdom nor France, which both have small nuclear arsenals, has conditioned their nuclear reductions on other's.) Yet Beijing's goalposts with regards to the required depth of US-Russian cuts kept moving as Washington and Moscow downsized their arsenals. In 1982, China said that it would join arms control after the United States and Soviet Union halt the testing, manufacture, and deployment of nuclear weapons, and reduced their arsenal by 50%. Then, in 1988, China promised to join after further "drastic reductions" by the United States and Russia and, in 1995, it stated that it would not adopt nuclear restraint measures unless Washington and Moscow reduced their arsenals "far beyond" those envisioned by current arms control talks, abandoned tactical nuclear weapons and missile defenses, and agreed to a joint no-first-use pledge. In the 2000s, Beijing's position changed again: its position became that China would join "when the conditions are ripe", without providing specifics about these conditions.

So, China warmed up to arms control starting the 1980s, but only up to a point. As some have put it, from that time through to the 2000s, Beijing "sought to engage in arms-control arrangements that limited constraints on itself and maximized constraints on others while attempting to protect its international image" (Hiim and Langset Troan 2021, 89).

[13]Of note: there is evidence that China worried about proliferation earlier; for instance, it signed the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which establishes a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Latin America, in 1973 and, significantly, it was the first of the NPT-recognized nuclear weapon state to do so.

The Return of Complete Rejection?

From the late 2000s through to the early 2020s, China became increasingly skeptical about arms control, so much so that by the end of the 2010s it seemed to have returned to its original stance that it is "a big fraud".

Skepticism Flares Back Up

In the late 2000s, China expressed support for US President Barack Obama's efforts to move towards a "world without nuclear weapons" and for his administration's subsequent work to conclude the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (dubbed New START) with Russia and stated intention to achieve much more, including, down the line, with other nuclear-armed states. At the United Nations General Assembly in 2009, for instance, Chinese President Hu Jintao praised the approach and called for "credible steps to push forward the nuclear disarmament process" (Jintao 2009). This view was later echoed in Chinese strategic documents, notably the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, which notes that "nuclear arms control and disarmament have an active role in maintaining strategic stability, halting the outbreak of nuclear war, limiting the scale of nuclear war, reducing nuclear war's destruction, and saving on military spending" (Academy of Military Science 2013).

In the background, however, many in the Chinese national security community wondered about the feasibility of a nuclear-weapon-free-world and, more importantly, worried about the implications for China's security. The crux of the problem was that engaging in arms control would require nuclear transparency from China, a big ask for Beijing given its longstanding reliance on opacity about its capabilities due to the small size of its arsenal (Santoro and Gromoll 2020, 7).

Chinese strategists, plainly, expressed concerns that increased Chinese nuclear transparency could undermine Chinese nuclear deterrence. Some also occasionally stressed that China did not have arms control verification experience, which could expose them to predatory behavior from the stronger states, chiefly the United States (and Russia) (Santoro and Gromoll 2020, 21). Chinese strategists also feared that if China were to resist international calls for nuclear transparency, it would be blamed for torpedoing the nuclear-weapon-free-world project, especially if the United Kingdom and France were to join that project readily (Jishe 2010, 78–79).

More importantly, many Chinese strategists were deeply skeptical about US intentions, even wondering if the US project had a hidden agenda, chiefly maintaining US "absolute security" and keeping China and others down. Significantly, while praising the potential benefits of arms control, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* also describes it as a "struggle" and "an important means by which nuclear states ... contend for and maintain their own nuclear superiority and strategic superiority, and limit and weaken the nuclear capability of their strategic opponents" (Academy of Military Science 2013).

In that spirit, many Chinese strategists ended up dismissing Obama's nuclear-weapon-free-world project, noting its limits, such as the US reluctance to acknowledge mutual vulnerability with China (even though the United States does so with Russia), as well as its hypocrisy, best exemplified, per Beijing, by the concurrent US push for nuclear and strategic (missile defense) modernization and, via its "pivot", its increased emphasis on Asia (Santoro and Gromoll 2020, 9).

Accordingly, from the late 2000s until the mid-2010s, China did not "buy" the US call for nuclear arms control and disarmament. Worse, that project seemed to have had the opposite effect: inadvertently, it led Beijing to question the very benefit of arms control for China. During that period, despite its backing of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, Beijing also seemingly became increasingly skeptical about non-proliferation, notably when it comes to addressing North Korea's nuclear program.

Skepticism Hardens

From the mid-2010s, especially during the time of the administration of Donald Trump (but even a couple of years earlier), Chinese skepticism about arms control began to harden. Beijing became increasingly convinced that Washington was determined to use arms control to advance a policy of "nuclear hegemony" and constrain Chinese (and other's) capabilities. As one Chinese strategist put it when reflecting on the 2018 US *Nuclear Posture Review*, "the Trump administration is trying to use US nuclear weapons for global and regional hegemony again" (Bin 2018) Chinese strategists also concluded that the United States was using arms control as one tool among many others to maintain and strengthen its "absolute security", notably against China, which Washington had now unmistakably identified as its primary competitor in its key strategic reviews.

Beijing, as mentioned, rejected Washington's increasingly vocal calls for China to join arms control, be it trilaterally with Russia or bilaterally with just the United States, on the same old argument that "the conditions are not ripe" given the small size of the Chinese arsenal in comparison with the US and Russian arsenals. But Beijing also pointed out what it saw as US hypocrisy, blasting Washington for clinging to a "Cold War mentality" with its decision not only to proceed with the nuclear and strategic modernization of the previous administration, but also to reintroduce low-yield nuclear weapons on submarines, which they argued equated to lowering the threshold for nuclear use (Santoro and Gromoll 2020, 8). Of course, Beijing also did not miss an opportunity to criticize Washington (not Moscow, or much less) for the unraveling of arms control, which was triggered, in Chinese eyes, by the US decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty and an outrightly negative attitude towards New START extension (Santoro and Gromoll 2020, 20–21). Beijing further blamed Washington for refusing to even entertain the possibility of any form of restraint on key non-nuclear strategic capabilities, notably missile defenses, space systems, and even advanced conventional weapons, which, from a Chinese perspective, impede progress on arms control (Santoro and Gromoll 2020, 14–16).

The dynamics changed slightly after the arrival of Joe Biden in the White House in 2021. Beijing welcomed the extension of New START, which the Biden administration worked hard to secure immediately after taking power. But Beijing also cringed when Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated that the United States would seek to pursue arms control with China (Blinken 2021). Quickly thereafter, Beijing concluded that US intentions had not changed—i.e. that the United States was still after "absolute security"—as it became clear that the new US administration would not be any less hawkish towards China than in its predecessor. From a Chinese perspective, then, if US intentions were hidden under Obama, they

were revealed under Trump and remained alive and well under Biden. So, in Chinese eyes, during that whole time, the United States, the stronger country, wanted to use arms control to impose one-sided restrictions on China, the weaker country, hence Beijing's continuous "no" to engagement and its decision to engage in a crash nuclear build-up.

Accordingly, by the early 2020s China had come full circle. Its initial rejection of arms control in the 1960s dominated its thinking again, with no indication that it would change any time soon. One important thing seemed to have changed, however: China's decisions vis-à-vis its nuclear arsenal, which it appeared determined to grow considerably, and fast.

On First Steps Towards Developing a Nuclear Arms Control Relationship with China

Based on the history of US-China nuclear relations as well as that of China's perceptions of, and approach to, arms control, what can and should Washington do to get Beijing to say yes to some form of engagement in this area or, at a minimum, get past the Chinese no? The rest of the paper discusses what US priorities and goals should be in the immediate future. It also highlights the challenges that Washington will face and, insofar as possible, recommend ways to address them.

Priorities and Goals

The prerequisite to nuclear arms control is nuclear dialogue. In other words, to negotiate agreements that regulate their strategic nuclear behavior and capabilities, US and Chinese officials need to talk. Establishing a dedicated substantive nuclear dialogue with China should then be the United States' utmost priority.

To do so, the United States should do the following:

Keep the Pressure On

The United States should be clear that business-as-usual is no longer an option. Beijing must agree to nuclear dialogue if, as some Chinese strategists indicated not too long ago, China wants to develop a "constructive nuclear relationship with the United States" (Cossa, Glosserman, and Santoro 2018, 2, 6). It is especially important in the context of China's apparent nuclear build-up. To pressure China, the United States should make clear to China—i.e. be explicit in words and deeds – that it will now adapt its deterrence posture to account for Chinese military developments and deployments as they evolve. Until recently, the United States had adapted its posture primarily to account for the mounting North Korean nuclear threat. Of note, US regional missile defense systems are meant to provide protection from *any* missile attack, regardless of their point of origin. That said, the United States has always been clear that its systems (and other capabilities) cannot, and are not intended to, undermine the strategic balance with Russia and China. Plainly, these capabilities are *not* designed to protect the US homeland against large-scale attacks.

Doing so is necessary because neither the US "patient approach" through to the mid-2010s – which essentially consisted in waiting for Beijing to be ready to engage – nor the

confrontational stance of the Trump administration – which primarily sought to blame and shame Beijing for not engaging – paid dividends. Now, therefore, the United States should stress that dialogue is an urgent goal, and that it will act to counter China at least until such dialogue is established and, more realistically, once there is substantive progress.

Make a High-Level Statement on Multilateralizing Arms Control

The United States should consider issuing a statement stressing that, going forward, making progress on nuclear arms control will be difficult if it does not include other nuclear-armed states, especially those which expand and improve their arsenal at a fast pace. Such a statement, ideally made by the US president, should make clear that it is particularly important that China join the arms control process given that they are engaged in significant build-ups.

Even though US-Russia relations are dire (perhaps the worst they have even been), and the future of US-Russia arms control is uncertain, especially since Moscow's decision to invade Ukraine, the United States should not dismiss the possibility of issuing that statement jointly with Russia. Granted, in the current context, the odds of such a joint statement are extremely remote. The United States should not rule it out, however. Russia has been pushing for arms control multilateralization at least since 2013, and it is an open secret that Moscow does not relish the idea of China becoming a nuclear superpower. The United States, in other words, should leave the door open to some forms of cooperation with Russia during (or, rather, despite) intense competition.

Moreover, the United States should coordinate its "multilateralization efforts" in other forums, notably in the "P5 process", i.e. the nuclear work that the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council have been conducted since 2009. Although there are many unknowns about the future of this process, primarily in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the United States should ensure, assuming it continues, that it builds toward arms control multilateralization (Williams 2022). Promoting joint work on nonproliferation and nuclear security with China may also help build habits of cooperation between US and Chinese officials, indirectly helping create a framework for future arms control discussions.

Incentivize China's Participation

In addition to pressuring China to establish nuclear dialogue, the United States should seek to incentivize Chinese participation. Incentivization is important given Beijing's deep-seated skepticism about US intentions. To be sure, given the high (and possibly growing) level of Chinese skepticism towards the United States, Washington will likely be unable to convince Beijing that it is prepared to negotiate in good faith. Still, the United States should try its best, if only because pressure alone is unlikely to work.

Incentivization can take several forms. One is especially important, however: the United States should consider publicly acknowledging what has long been the case, and possibly a primary sticking point for Beijing to accept nuclear dialogue, the fact that China's strategic deterrent is credible and that the United States and China are in a mutually vulnerable relationship. While proponents of the current US policy of neither confirming nor denying the existence of such a relationship argue that it contributes to deterrence of China and assurance of allies, notably Japan, critics counter that

Washington's longstanding refusal to acknowledge that reality – a fact of life – has given Beijing the impression that the United States seeks to dominate China (i.e. maintain "nuclear hegemony" or "absolute security"), and not treat it as a legitimate negotiating partner; they add that refusing to acknowledge that reality complicates greatly US relations with allies and partners.

A recent study on the topic led by this author has shown that the two approaches present benefits, costs, and risks, and that neither offers a silver bullet (Santoro 2022). By and large, however, going for a "vulnerability acknowledgement" might still prove the best option. In the current situation, it is, at a minimum, worth testing its merits.

Propose a Comprehensive, I.E., Not Just Nuclear, Dialogue

A narrowly focused dialogue is unlikely to work given China's quest for strategic equivalency and tendency to regard strategic stability holistically with, unlike the United States, a focus on a myriad of strategic issues, not just capabilities (Santoro and Gromoll 2020, 10–14). The United States should then propose a broader dialogue that focuses on capabilities *and* larger strategic issues to establish a foundation upon which the two countries can build to reduce and manage strategic instability writ large, and eventually conclude arms control agreements. In so doing, the United States should build on the rich work that has been conducted at the track-2/-1.5 levels in these areas since the 2000s, and these unofficial efforts should then act as support for official work once dialogue begins (Santoro and Gromoll 2020; Roberts 2020). Because of China's internal hierarchical structure, with power increasingly concentrated in Xi's hands, the United States should make nuclear dialogue a priority in US-China presidential meetings; only endorsement at the top level is likely to lead to substantive nuclear dialogue.

Simultaneously, the United States (and Russia) should consider inviting Chinese officials to observe an inspection under the New START verification regime, assuming its activities resumes. Doing so would set an example of transparency and familiarize Chinese officials with the ins and outs of implementing nuclear arms control. Some have recommended other forms of capacity-building efforts on arms control verification as well (Zhao 2022). This is important given the concerns expressed by some Chinese strategists that China lacks expertise and experience in this area.

Coordinate with Allies and Partners

The United States should leverage its increasingly tight deterrence dialogues and discussions with allies and partners (especially from Asia) to coordinate messaging on China's reluctance to engage in nuclear dialogue. US allies and partners should make clear that they and perhaps other states in the region will act in concert with the United States to protect themselves from China's political and military aggression, and that initiating a substantive US-China nuclear dialogue could be a relief valve for Beijing.

At the same time, the United States should reassure allies and partners that nuclear dialogue, should it happen, will not undermine their interests. The United States, in other words, should commit to coordinating all US-China dialogue discussions with its allies and partners.

Once dialogue begins, the United States should focus on crisis management and lay groundwork for arms control to begin:

Focus on Crisis Management

While the conclusion of arms control agreements should be the dialogue's goal, the priority should be the development of crisis avoidance and crisis management mechanisms, for two reasons. First, because China's quest for strategic equivalency risks leading to inadvertent escalation. Neither side understands cross-domain deterrence well, let alone their respective redlines (Santoro and Gromoll 2020; Panda 2020). Second, crisis management should be the priority because, realistically, arms control, as in agreements limiting or reducing nuclear forces, is not in the cards in the foreseeable future. So, because arms control, for now, is out of reach, the focus should be crisis management. Of note: the US-Soviet arms control relationship grew out of crisis management agreements, notably the conclusion in 1963 of a bilateral "hotline".

Good work has already been done on crisis management. The 2014 memorandum of understanding, for instance, led to two bilateral military-to-military mechanisms, one setting rules of behavior for safety in air and maritime encounters, the other requiring advanced notification of major military activities. At the track-1.5 level, work has also been advanced to define "rules of the road" in the nuclear, cyber, and space domains. The United States and China should build on this work and could, for instance, begin by working towards the conclusion of a bilateral missile launch notification agreement.

Still, recent research suggests that the United States should manage its expectations about what it can achieve with China in the crisis management space because Beijing has a fundamentally different understanding of, and approach to, crises and how they should be handled (Kamphausen 2023).

Lay the Groundwork for Arms Control

Developing an arms control relationship with China is going to take time, not only because the United States does not have such relationship with China (and therefore US and Chinese officials have not developed habits of cooperation in this area), but also because the two countries have vastly different arsenals. The United States, however, should begin to explore realistic arms control options with China right now, including the possibility of asymmetric bargains that account for the different force structures and geographic dispositions of the two sides.

The United States should consider arms control options which focus on types, rather than numbers, of weapons; doing so would side-step the numerical asymmetries and focus instead on destabilizing characteristics of weapons. The United States should also look at options which focus on movements in arsenals rather than specific numbers, for example moratoria or caps on the further development or deployment of specific systems. Trilateral US-Russia-China bargains should also be examined. Some have argued, for instance, that the three countries could work together to prevent a reciprocal INF-type missile build-up in Asia, set an equal ceiling for all INF-range ground- and air-launched missiles, combine the INF and New START frameworks, or include kinetic missile defense interceptors into an overall ceiling (Zhao 2020, 77–81). At the trilateral or P5 levels, concluding political and doctrinal statements should be explored as well and could help nudge China to improve transparency or conclude restraint agreements on its capabilities. Track-2/-1.5 processes should support this work.

Challenges (And How to Manage Them)

There will be many challenges, both in the lead-up to nuclear dialogue and once it is established. They include the following:

Balancing Pressure and Incentives

Finding the right balance between keeping the pressure on, and extending a hand to, Beijing to get to dialogue will be challenging. While pressure alone will not work, it will be difficult to identify what to give Beijing, and how much is enough, to make progress and yield substantive results. Also, it will be important to ensure that Beijing does not take US concessions without making concessions on its own. A related difficulty will be coordination with US allies, mentioned earlier: any decision to engage Beijing will need to include close coordination with, and ideally agreement by, regional allies, notably Japan, to reassure them that their security is not negatively impacted by US-China dialogue and decisions. There is no magic solution to address these challenges; it will require careful diplomacy and enlightened statecraft.

Acknowledging Mutual Vulnerability

Publicly acknowledging that the United States and China are in a relationship of mutual vulnerability would not be risk-free. Beijing could be emboldened and decide to act more aggressively in its neighborhood at the conventional and gray-zone levels, notably against US allies and partners. Such a policy shift could thus have undesired effects on Japan and others.

It will be essential, therefore, to consider views from all stakeholders and consult closely with allies and partners before adopting such a change; it will likely be necessary to strengthen extended deterrence or, for instance, let Japan develop offensive conventional strike capabilities (an option that Tokyo is currently debating). Also critical will be to make clear to Beijing that such an acknowledgement would be conditional on China engaging in substantive dialogue over the long term, and on Beijing making corresponding concessions, for example in terms of transparency about its capabilities.

Making/Sustaining Progress

Once dialogue is established, making/sustaining progress toward crisis management and arms control will be challenging. The United States, then, will need to have a clear picture in mind of what it wants and can realistically achieve with China both in the short term and, insofar as possible, even in the long term. It is critical, therefore, that the United States develop a roadmap with key milestones, building upon the work done at the track-2/-1.5 levels and the emerging body of work on China and arms control (Williams 2019). Conducting this work will require investing in a commodity currently in short supply: scholars that combine expertise and experience on China and strategic nuclear issues.

Liaising with Allies, Keeping the Bigger Picture in Mind

It will be essential to liaise with its regional allies constantly because most if not all will be concerned that dialogue and any agreement concluded with China could damage US extended deterrence and reduce their security. Failure to engage allies would likely have detrimental consequences; in the most extreme scenario, some could opt to develop their own nuclear weapons. Moreover, because Beijing plans for its defense primarily with the

United States in mind but also with Russia, India, and possibly even North Korea, Washington will need to consider developments in the broader multipolar context when it advances proposals (Santoro 2021b).

Explaining That Competition and Engagement are Not Mutually Exclusive

Finally, it will be paramount, notably for domestic politics purposes, for the United States to explain that it can compete and cooperate with (i.e. engage) China at the same time. Competition in the nuclear domain will continue even if the United States and China agree to dialogue and arms control, as was the case between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In other words, competition and cooperation are not, and should not be seen as, mutually exclusive. Because passions run high when it comes to US-China (and "great power") competition, it is an important point that should not be dismissed.

Conclusions

The United States and China do not have a nuclear arms control relationship, nor will they have one any time soon. The historical record shows that when the United States exhibited interest in bringing China into the arms control fold in the 1960s, Beijing did not want to consider it; more bluntly, Chinese officials rejected it outrightly. Then, when China began to warm up to the arms control agenda a little from the 1980s, the United States did not make it a priority to get Beijing to endorse that agenda fully; for a long time, US officials even ignored "nuclear China". Now in the era of "US-China strategic competition", and in the context of a seemingly ambitious and rapid nuclear build-up by China, Washington again desperately wants to develop an arms control relationship with Beijing. Yet Beijing has returned to its original stance that doing so is not in its national interests. In the foreseeable future, the prospects for a nuclear arms control breakthrough are thus poor.

It would be a mistake to think that nothing can be done, however. Even though going forward US-China relations will be primarily competitive and leave little room for cooperation, there is nonetheless a pathway for Washington to try and nudge Beijing towards nuclear arms control. It entails adopting a carefully crafted approach that combines pressure and inducements to jumpstart nuclear dialogue and, once dialogue begins, conducting substantive discussions on crisis management, with work on arms control initially taking a back seat. Some will criticize this approach, arguing that a more daring approach is needed to manage the increasingly tense relationship between Washington and Beijing. Yet a review of the realm of the possible suggests that expecting too much, too soon is unlikely to yield results and a recipe for failure. Just as the US-Soviet/Russia nuclear arms control relationship took years to develop, so will the US-China nuclear arms control relationship.[14]

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[14]Significantly, the original theorists of arms control defined it not solely as agreements limiting or reducing strategic forces but as any effort made by countries to enhance their security by maintaining strategic stability with their competitors, i.e. prevent war and arms races. Per that definition, therefore, the approach proposed in this paper would immediately jumpstart a US-China nuclear arms control relationship.

Notes on Contributor

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