



ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATION ACADEMY

Perceptions of China, Russia, and the United States of the Opportunities and Limitations of Nuclear Talks

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MEMORANDUM: PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA, RUSSIA, AND THE UNITED STATES OF THE OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF NUCLEAR TALKS

Policy Memo

TO: The Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, and the United States’ Secretary of State

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DATE: May 2, 2023

SUBJECT: Perceptions of China, Russia, and the United States of the Opportunities and Limitations of Nuclear Talks

The United States and Russia have relied on nuclear arms control to manage mutual nuclear risks. China historically declined to engage in nuclear arms control with the United States and the Soviet Union due to its vastly smaller nuclear arsenal during the Cold War. However, with reduced US and Russian arsenals and as China modernizes, diversifies, and expands its nuclear forces, the United States has begun calling for China’s participation in arms control. Whether constructive arms control measures involving China are likely to be convened depends on whether the United States, China, and Russia all see arms control as serving their national interests and can find common ground to craft a mutually beneficial arms control package.

In this policy brief, using a literature review and expert interviews, we seek to analyze whether an arms control agreement might be feasible between these parties. We map whether arms control aligns with the interests of the United States, China, and Russia to identify if a zone of possible agreement (ZOPA) exists. If not, parties will instead choose their best alternatives to a negotiated agreement (BATNA) rather than conclude an agreement.

The United States

The United States’ key interests are in preserving the international status quo and deterring both Russia and China from nuclear use or coercion. China is named as the Department of Defense’s “pacing challenge” in the 2022 National Defense Strategy². The United States views China as having both the intent and, increasingly, the capacity to revise the international order. The United States’ key goal in the Asia-Pacific is to contain China’s increased militarization and prevent China’s dominance in the region. A key part of this strategy involves maintaining alliances with other actors in the region, namely Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan³.

The United States has not had concerns over its ability to deter Chinese nuclear use as China has historically maintained a small arsenal of only a few hundred warheads. However, China has increasingly begun to modernize and expand its nuclear forces. There are concerns within the United States that this expansion indicates that China may be seeking to achieve some degree of

¹ This memo was written as a requirement of the 2022-2023 Arms Control Negotiation Academy program. Views expressed in the memo are the opinions of the authors and do not reflect the views of their employers.

² U.S. Department of Defense, 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, 2022; also see U.S. Department of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2022.

³ The White House, Fact Sheet : Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, February 2022.

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nuclear parity with the United States and Russia⁴. The addition of another peer competitor to deter would create a pressure for the United States to increase its nuclear arsenal size which, in turn, could spark arms racing with Russia and/or China. The United States seeks to engage China in arms control in order to avoid such a situation.

In particular, the US views China's goal to unify Taiwan with mainland China of specific concern. While not a part of a military alliance, the US does provide Taiwan with military support and to maintain the capacity to resist force or coercion that would jeopardize the security of Taiwan⁵. There is significant concern in the expert community that Taiwan could be a flashpoint that has the possibility to bring China and the US into direct conflict. On the other hand, both Japan and the Republic of Korea are under the US' nuclear umbrella that guarantees their security as part of a strategy of extended deterrence. This means that if either Japan or the Republic of Korea would come into conflict with China it would require US actions. The US is therefore likely to consider how arms control, or alternative options, would serve its ability to maintain these alliances.

While China has jumped to the forefront of the United States' strategy, Russia remains as the United States' chief nuclear competitor. Russia and the United States are roughly at nuclear parity. Both are parties to the bilateral New START agreement which mutually limits the same number of strategic nuclear weapons and launchers to support nuclear deterrence by preventing either side from attempting to gain a first strike capability over the other⁶. With Russia's invasion in Ukraine the Russian-US relationship is at a nadir and Russia announced on February 21, 2023 that Russia would be suspending participation in the inspection provisions of the agreement, though later clarified that Russia would remain party to the agreement and respect its limits. Even if the two countries restore full participation in New START, the agreement will expire in 2026 and the risk of the agreement expiring without a replacement are high. To that effect, the United States needs to consider the possible consequences of steps towards deterring China might have on the US-Russian relationship.

The United States BATNA is to develop a nuclear posture to simultaneously deter two nuclear peers. This could be pursued while adhering to numerical limits with Russia, perhaps by placing a heavier emphasis on precision conventional weapons and qualitative improvements in United States nuclear forces. Alternatively, the United States could forego arms control limits and resort to arms racing with both Russia and China. While the Russian economy may not be in a strong enough place to allow it to sustain a length arms race, China's economy could challenge that of the United States in the coming decades, so China could potentially keep pace in a nuclear arms race with the United States⁷. Arms racing, of course, comes with many attendant risks both of nuclear conflict and undermining the global nuclear non-proliferation order which is predicated on the nuclear weapons states, including the United States, China, and Russia, pursuing nuclear disarmament.

⁴ Expert interviews 2022-11-29, 2022-12-12, and 2022-12-13.

⁵ U.S. Congress, Taiwan Relations Act, April 1979.

⁶ The number of warheads is subject to counting rules which consider a bomber as a single warhead, despite being able to carry multiple warheads. Additionally, limits only applied to deployed weapons, so non-strategic nuclear weapons, which are kept in storage are not counted.

⁷ Expert interview 2022-12-13.

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China

China's interests are to protect its territorial integrity, ensure deterrence through a survivable second-strike capability, and, in the longer term, to modify and even partially dismantle the United States-led post-war order and become a global superpower. China values its nuclear weapons primarily for their political leverage and significance, and as a necessity for getting the United States to accept China as a peer on the global stage⁸. As such, China will be wary of entering any agreement which codifies it as a second-class party. China takes the position that it will not participate at all in strategic arms control until the United States and Russia significantly reduce the sizes of their own nuclear arsenals. However, the numerical threshold at which China would begin participating in arms control has always been hazy⁹. China may instead prefer to build up to some form of parity with the United States and Russia before it is willing to engage on numerical limits¹⁰.

China has shown that it has an interest in the preservation of the nuclear regime based on the P5 dialogue and NPT. After accession to the NPT in 1992, China has supported non-proliferation efforts and has positioned itself as an intermediary between the nuclear weapons states and non-weapons states, strengthening efforts to increase China's sphere of influence¹¹. It is also clear that China is becoming more engaged, and in some cases even vocal, on the non-proliferation fora where it previously preferred to stay silent. So while nuclear arms control may not currently align with Chinese interests, non-proliferation is perhaps a topic where China has shared interests with the United States and Russia.

China's BATNA is to continue with its nuclear build-up free of any external limits. Although China may see this goal as directly serving its interest, it may not appreciate the attendant risks. According to expert opinion, China does not accept that its current nuclear build-up might push the United States towards its own nuclear build-up¹². It categorically rejects the notion that China's behavior drives reactions from the United States, instead it views its current nuclear build-up as a reaction to perceived United States aggression. This dynamic creates a pressure towards arms racing that may not be fully appreciated in China's negotiating calculus.

Russia

Russia's interests are in deterring the United States, as well as NATO, and in reconfiguring the European security environment to be more favorable for Russia. Russia relies on its nuclear arsenal to deter the United States but does not currently view China as a pressing threat to its security, despite sharing a significant land border and fraught history. In this regard, engaging China into arms control does not significantly address Russian interests¹³. Additionally, with Russian alienation from the West due to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia is likely to grow more

⁸ Expert interview 2022-11-29.

⁹ Bates Gill, *China and Nuclear Arms Control: Current Positions and Future Policies*, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, April 2010.

¹⁰ Per expert opinion, parity may not be strict numerical parity as the driver of the Chinese nuclear buildup is not a specific military rationale but based on the political and psychological impact that the weapons have. However, per another expert's opinion, this view may be changing as the Chinese discourse surrounding nuclear weapons has shifted to include discussing nuclear warfighting, a topic that is more firmly couched in nuclear war planning. Expert interviews 2022-11-29 and 2022-12-13.

¹¹ Bates Gill, *China and Nuclear Arms Control: Current Positions and Future Policies*, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, April 2010.

¹² Expert interview 2022-11-29.

¹³ Expert interview 2022-12-12.

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reliant on China in the near future. Therefore, it could be argued that Russia will even be less likely to expend political capital to convince China to participate in arms control.

Russia perceives China's nuclear build-up to be motivated by an aspiration to achieve a status of superpower and to acquire tools for escalation dominance. Additionally, it may also seem that in the context of China's nuclear build-up the term "minimal deterrence" might have acquired an elusive meaning as it is increasingly difficult to define "a minimum" when your strategic adversary is continuously increasing their capabilities¹⁴. As one expert put it, China's build-up is not motivated by Taiwan specifically, but by growing United States alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. It is also important how China perceives those growing alliances, and whether the United States efforts to portray them in a certain way are convincing or, on the contrary, provocative. Efforts and discourse should not focus on Taiwan alone, but address "spheres of interests" and "balance of capabilities".¹⁵

The Russian expert community identifies minimal to no value in Russia engaging China bilaterally in arms control negotiations. Trilateral discussions, which would include China, the United States and Russia, are considered as problematically complex. For example, inspections of nuclear sites – a problem that has not been solved even in the context of Russia-US relations – would be difficult to design with China as it has no real experience in this field and is mistrustful of verification in general.¹⁶ One expert expressed an opinion that China will unlikely become a driver of any negotiation process, that any talks on arms control should take place bilaterally between the United States and Russia and seek to attract China's participation.¹⁷

Russia's BATNA is to maintain its status quo position and keep arms control focused on the bilateral United States-Russia relationship. Increased United States-China competition would likely serve Russian interests by drawing away US resources, giving Russia more capability to reshape its security environment in Europe. Given that Russia has suspended participation in New START which is set to expire in 2026, a continued build-up by China may make the prospects of a follow-on agreement bleak. The United States may seek to improve its deterrent through increasing the size of its nuclear arsenal or adding new precision conventional capabilities, both of which could be perceived by Russia to be threatening¹⁸. Either radical scenario – whether China acquires a comparatively strong nuclear arsenal or on the contrary fails to do so – would force Russia to be more precautionary and to pursue more nuanced politics in Eurasia. If China and the United States do indeed engage in arms racing, Russia would be pressured to participate, or else, lose ground vis-à-vis the United States. Over the short term, this would be manageable for Russia, given its recent nuclear modernization and achievements in developing advanced weapons systems such as hypersonics. However, if an arms race played out over an extended period of time, Russia could struggle to keep up given that the Russian economy is an order of magnitude smaller than that of either the United States or China.

¹⁴ Expert interviews 2022-12-12 and 2022-12-13.

¹⁵ Expert interview 2022-12-12

¹⁶ Tong Zhao, China's Approach to Arms Control Verification, Sandia Report, March 2022.

¹⁷ Expert interview 2022-12-12.

¹⁸ Alexey Arbatov, Gambit or Endgame? The New State of Arms Control, Carnegie Moscow Center, March 29, 2011.

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ZOPA

Unfortunately, if there is a ZOPA today, it is miniscule and does not include any agreements that would include trilateral limits on nuclear forces. Central to this is a misalignment of the interests of China with arms control. China's goal to become a superpower means that it will be unlikely to accept any limitations which would codify it as a junior partner. This is especially true in the case of nuclear weapons, which it views as having significant value in its transition into a great power. If a ZOPA does exist today, it is limited to measures that will build trust, familiarity, and confidence. A ZOPA may emerge in the future after China has completed a significant nuclear build-up and can negotiate with the United States and Russia as a strategic nuclear peer. However,

the process of building up to that point will impact what limits the United States will see as acceptable. The United States may struggle to see a way to simultaneously deter both Russia and a post-build-up China, without expanding its own nuclear forces which could spark arms racing. However, if the United States can develop a plan for deterring both countries without resorting to its own nuclear build-up, there may be an opportunity for an agreement to be concluded, likely through the P5 forum, though that will bring its own complications. Russia, for its part, would be less directly served by including China in arms control, but its BATNA has a risk of being unfavorable to Russian interests, should the United States and China engage in an extended and vigorous arms race. None of the parties would be served by arms racing, so all parties should focus on what concrete steps they can take that would mitigate the risks of an arms race.

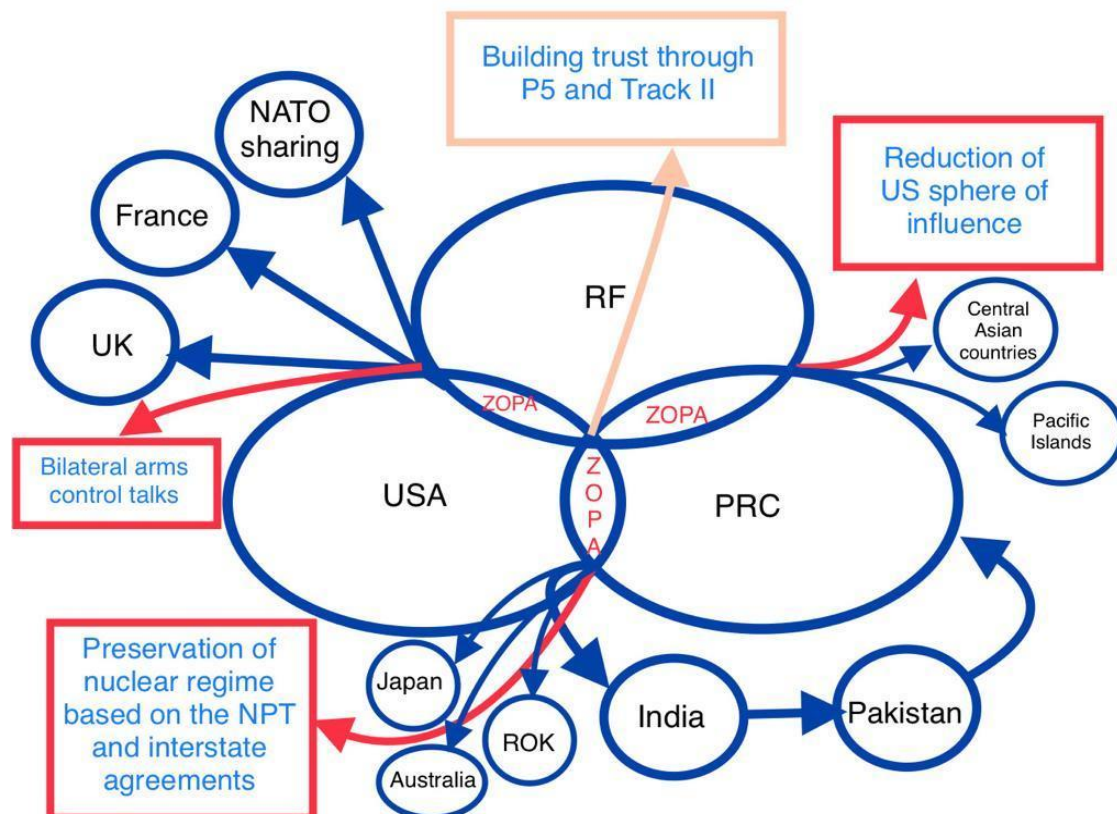


Figure 1. Visualization of ZOPAs (red and gold) between the United States (USA), Russian Federation (RF), and China (PRC).

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Recommendations:

1. China, Russia, and the United States should take all steps possible to avoid an arms race and reduce nuclear risk. Given that current conditions are not in place for a ZOPA to exist, the states should focus on mitigating the risks of not having a negotiated agreement. Russia and the United States should consider how to achieve their deterrence goals without increasing the sizes of their nuclear arsenals while China should determine how to pursue its political goals with the smallest build-up possible.
2. The United States and Russia should focus on bilateral negotiations with both direct and indirect influence. The return to and replacement of the New START agreement to maintain a ceiling on the sizes of nuclear arsenals of both countries will have direct impact. This will require a concerted effort to de-escalate the political relationship to create the environment for possible negotiations. The indirect influence includes building a framework of negotiations that will become attractive for China's possible engagement and thus mitigating non-nuclear geopolitical risks for both countries in the Asia-Pacific region and Central Asia.
3. A quantitative approach to the assessment of nuclear capabilities should be re-thought on behalf of all parties, as it is becoming less applicable with a growing number of world players with nuclear arsenal (e.g. minimal deterrence) and due to the increasing number of modern weapons which are non-nuclear but have strategic character.
4. China, Russia, and the United States should pursue non-binding confidence building measures and communications mechanisms, perhaps through the P5, and track II dialogues to build mutual trust and relationships to lay the groundwork towards convening negotiations on a possible agreement should conditions change to create a ZOPA.

The Authors

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