



ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATION ACADEMY

Reviving Strategic Stability: How the P5's Interests Shape Options for Arms Control Engagement

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MEMORANDUM: REVIVING STRATEGIC STABILITY: HOW THE P5'S INTERESTS SHAPE OPTIONS FOR ARMS CONTROL ENGAGEMENT

Policy Memo

TO:

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SUBJECT: Reviving Strategic Stability: How the P5's Interest Shape Options for Arms Control Engagement

Historically, major arms control treaties such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) were negotiated under the framework of strategic stability.² For instance, ABM ensured states' second-strike capabilities and reduced their desire for first strike by restricting missile defense systems; INF reduced the likelihood of theater-level crisis and arms racing by banning INF-range missiles altogether. Most other US-USSR/Russia efforts to reach treaties and agreements, like SALT and the START series, also relied on strategic stability as a conceptual framework. These successful cases suggest that the framework of strategic stability worked well for the Cold War era, or under a US-USSR bipolar structure. However, in the current era, the effectiveness of this framework seems to have significantly declined.

Since the 2000s, for instance, multiple treaties including the ABM and INF have died, New START is due to expire soon with no similar agreement on the horizon yet, and no new arms control treaties between the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's five Nuclear Weapon States (NWSs) have been reached. At the same time, several of those states have increased their nuclear arsenals or played up the role of nuclear weapons in their policies and doctrines. These all indicate a general lack of interest or motivation from the NWSs to engage in nuclear arms control.

That said, the P5 states, in theory, might still share a collective interest in maintaining stability. For now, other interests seem to have won the day. Accordingly, we seek to find room in a

¹ This memo was written as a requirement of the 2024-2025 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.

²The term strategic stability can be assigned a spectrum of possible meanings. Classically, it describes the absence of incentives to use nuclear weapons first (crisis stability) and the absence of incentives to build up a nuclear force (arms race stability) in a nuclear deterrence relationship, or more abstractly, it describes a security environment in which states enjoy peaceful and harmonious relations. In the arms control community, although debates exist regarding the weight of independent variables, scholars most often adopt the classic definition of strategic stability (crisis stability plus arms race stability). Given this paper's goal of seeking solutions for arms control challenges and its targeted audience of arms control policy community, it uses the classic definition.

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reformed framework to further their collective interests with an eye toward avoiding nuclear war between any of them. To do this, we employ the Harvard Negotiation Method as an analytical model to first assess each of the NWSs' current positions, interests, and individual Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA). We then synthesize their respective interests and BATNAs to shape and assess elements of the Zones of Possible Agreement (ZOPAs) associated with various selected participant-sets. The ZOPA is a concept to describe deal designs that would further each participants' interests more than each of their respective BATNAs.

1. Today's Challenge

The transition to a more complex multipolar order complicates nuclear arms control efforts significantly. One major challenge is the divergence in the security priorities and interests of P5 states. For example, while the US and Russia remain the largest possessors of nuclear weapons, their arms control dialogue has been undermined by geopolitical tensions, including disputes over NATO expansion and conflicts like the war in Ukraine. Simultaneously, China's rapid development has increased Beijing's interest in international security issues, but its asymmetric arsenal compared to the US and Russia demotivate it to join the Cold War-model of arms control processes. So too have the UK and France had little incentive to participate directly in arms control so far, content instead with constraints on the Russian arsenal established by agreements they are not party to. This evolution of priorities and interests is compounded by technological advances, such as novel hypersonic missiles, autonomous weapons systems, and cyber capabilities, which blur the boundaries of traditional nuclear deterrence and create new risks.

2. Assessing the P5's Current Positions, Interests, and Best Alternatives to a Negotiated Agreement

2.1. China

China's **positions** on nuclear arms control are reflected in its official documents directly related to nuclear issues. Beijing states that it: A) supports the complete elimination of nuclear weapons and upholds the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), B) does not seek parity and nuclear arms racing, C) keeps its nuclear force at the minimum level required by national security, D) rejects nuclear sharing and foreign deployment, E) believes the countries with the largest arsenals bear special and primary responsibilities for nuclear disarmament, F) argues for an "objective and rational" approach to transparency, G) argues for the need to create a favorable international security environment for nuclear disarmament, and H) strives to reduce nuclear risks.³

³ *Statement of the Chinese Delegation at the Thematic Discussion on Nuclear Weapons at the First Committee of the 78th Session of the UNGA*, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN (16 Oct. 2023), http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/disarmament_armscontrol/unga/202310/t20231017_11162037.htm; 核裁军 (Nuclear disarmament), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (Jul. 2024), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjlb_673085/zjzg_673183/jks_674633/zclc_674645/hwt_674651/200802/t20080229_7

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Reading between the lines of these publicly defined positions and based on China's practices, one can try to distill Beijing's possible underlying **interests**. The first and most likely interest (corresponding mostly to positions C, D, E, and F) is to maintain its capabilities to deter nuclear attacks and prevent nuclear blackmails/coercions, or in other words, to **ensure its second-strike/retaliation capabilities**. In fact, Beijing has stated that this was its very reason for developing nuclear weapons in the first place and remains their purpose.⁴ China's experiences with US nuclear threats and coercions during the Truman and Eisenhower periods led to Beijing's decision to establish its own nuclear program (C).⁵ The US's potential re-deployment of strategic forces in Asia and potential upgraded nuclear sharing with its Asian allies directly harm this interest of China (D). Likewise, the US—without further nuclear disarmament—poses the most serious threat to the survivability of China's nuclear arsenal (E). The US model of nuclear transparency, which reveals quantitative information, is also widely believed by Chinese policy circles to harm China's retaliation capabilities (F).⁶

China's second interest (corresponding to G and H) is likely to **develop stable big-power relations**, among which **China-US relations** are the most critical. In fact, this relationship is often phrased by Beijing as "the most important bilateral relationship in the world."⁷ Under this context, arms control is usually instrumentalized as a means to achieve this interest. For instance, the height of China-US arms control coordination—China's restrained export of ballistic missiles to the Middle East (mostly Iran and Saudi Arabia) which later led to Beijing's compliance with the US-led Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR)—was during the high period of China-US relations.⁸ The November 2023 China-US official talks on arms control also took place immediately before the presidents' summit in San Francisco when bilateral relations were warming, whereas such talks were put on pause when the two countries engaged in diplomatic sparring in 2020-2022. The talks were suspended by China, again, after it protested US arms

[669094.shtml](#); *Statement on Nuclear Non-proliferation by Sun Xiaobo, Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry of China, at the Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (26 Jul. 2024), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/jks_665232/kjfywj_665252/202407/t20240729_11462308.html; *Statement by Ambassador Shen Jian at the Thematic Debate on nuclear weapons at the 79th Session of UNGA First Committee*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (22 Oct. 2024), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/jks_665232/kjfywj_665252/202410/t20241022_11511172.html.

⁴ *No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (23 Jul. 2024), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202407/t20240723_11458632.html.

⁵ 孙向丽. 毛泽东关于核武器的战略思想永放光芒——纪念我国第一颗原子弹爆炸成功. 中国军转民, 2014, (11):16-20. (Sun Xiangli, Mao Zedong's Strategic Thought on Nuclear Weapons Shines Eternally – Commemorating the Successful Explosion of China's First Atomic Bomb, *China Military to Civilian*, 2014, (11):16-20.)

⁶ Tong Zhao, *China's Approach to Arms Control Verification*, Sandia National Laboratories (Mar. 2022).

⁷ *President Xi Jinping Meets with U.S. President Joe Biden*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (16 Nov. 2023), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/xjpfmgjxzmshwtscxapec/202311/t20231116_11181442.html.

⁸ 忻悻, 《中美在导弹技术扩散问题上的矛盾与协调(1986-1994)》, 《军事历史研究》, 2019年第3期 (Xin Yi, "Sino-U.S. Conflicts and Coordination on the Proliferation of Missile Technology (1986-1994)," *Military History Research*, No. 3, 2019).

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sales to Taiwan as having “seriously compromised the political atmosphere.”⁹ This chronicle indicates an unwillingness of China to compartmentalize arms control issues from broader bilateral relations and an interest in associating them, hence position G. That said, position F might indicate that with misperception and miscalculation prevailing globally, Beijing seems to be increasingly cautious with nuclear risks. China may have started taking measures to address these risks, such as with its September 2024 unprecedented missile pre-launch notification to the US and the November 2024 China-US presidential consensus on maintaining human control over the decision to use nuclear weapons being possible evidence.

The third and rather obvious interest (corresponding to positions B and C) is to not let **China's economic development** be harmed by an unrestricted nuclear arms race. The fourth and fifth interests (corresponding to position A) are possibly 1) to **prevent further horizontal nuclear proliferation and maintain the current global nuclear order**, in which China and all P5 countries stand to benefit, and 2) to maintain its **international image**, especially in the eyes of the Global South, which China views as a major ally in an increasingly tense age of geopolitics.

China's **BATNA** is to continue growing its arsenal to the degree that it judges its retaliation capabilities secured while offering aspirational proposals on the multilateral fora without engaging in binding nuclear arms control processes.

2.2. Russia

Russia's **positions** on arms control have evolved in the context of the shifting global power dynamics, its changing military and political objectives as well as the tensions in US-Russia relations in recent years. Moscow's current stance is strongly influenced by a combination of its perception of unequal benefits (that the traditional arms control treaties have been more beneficial to the West, especially the United States), NATO's expansion, concerns about new technologies, a driven advancement in its own military prowess, as well as the fear from other countries' growing capabilities in the nuclear field. Russia has expressed particular concerns with US missile defense systems and their potential to undermine its nuclear deterrent, as well as with the proliferation of conventional weapons and military technologies in regions bordering Russia.¹⁰ It also argues that the classic arms control framework does not address the new security realities created by NATO's enlargement, and the positioning of advanced military assets near Russian borders.¹¹ In addition, Russia tends to regard nuclear arms control as a part of the “general geopolitical and military-strategic context” that cannot be isolated, and generally maintains that the actual state of US-Russia relations is for now unconducive to any talks in that sphere.¹² It has also linked the resumption of dialogue on strategic stability (started

⁹ *China says it has halted arms-control talks with US over Taiwan*, Reuters (17 Jul. 2024).

¹⁰ Jack Detsch, *Putin's Fixation With an Old-School U.S. Missile Launcher*, Foreign Policy (12 Jan. 2022).

¹¹ Matthew Loh, *Putin is starting to talk tough about the Baltics, laying the groundwork for 'future escalations' with NATO: ISW*, Business Insider (18 Jan. 2024); Vladimir Putin, *Presidential Address to Federal Assembly* (Feb. 21, 2023), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/7056>.

¹² Libby Flatoff & Daryl Kimball, *Russia Rejects New Nuclear Arms Talks*, Arms Control Association (Mar. 2024).

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in 2021 but suspended in 2022) to US support for Ukraine.¹³ Furthermore, the development of new military technologies, such as advanced missile defense systems, cyber warfare tools, and space-based weapons, has objectively complicated the traditional arms control framework and has contributed to Russia's newly voiced threat perceptions.¹⁴ Moscow has also expressed dissatisfaction that the current arms control framework does not include France's and UK's strategic arsenals.¹⁵

Russia's **interests** in arms control are primarily focused on maintaining national security through nuclear deterrence and ensuring that any arms control framework aligns with Russia's position as a major global power. Russia views its nuclear arsenal as a key element of its national security and a vital tool for ensuring it can protect itself from potential adversaries, particularly the US and others in NATO. Another major Russian interest is the preservation of parity with the US in strategic nuclear weapons along with maintaining its superiority in numbers of non-strategic nuclear warheads. Moscow aims to prevent NATO's military expansion and the deployment of offensive or defensive (i.e., anti-ballistic) military systems, especially offensive systems near Russian borders. In parallel, Russia seems concerned about the uncertain rise of emerging technologies with the potential to undermine its strategic position and destabilize global security (e.g., space-to-earth kinetic capabilities). Although Moscow fails to admit it, on balance, it favors a more inclusive treaty framework that accounts for China's nuclear capabilities along with those of France and the UK.¹⁶

Russia's **BATNA** most likely includes the continued advancement in the sorts of military high-technologies where it holds an advantage, such as hypersonic weapons, which are generally not covered by existing treaties. Its BATNA also includes making greater coercive use of tactical nuclear weapons which outnumber that of the US,¹⁷ countering or weakening NATO by waging regional wars, and maintaining strategic nuclear parity with the US. Another component of its BATNA is to partner more closely with North Korea and Iran militarily, and with China comprehensively.

2.3. United States

Although the second Trump Administration will continue to bring specific changes, US **positions** on strategic stability begin from a few premises that transcend presidential administrations: namely, that deterrence and arms control should work together in complementary fashion,

¹³ Michael Gordon, *Russia Rejects U.S. Proposal to Reopen Arms-Control Dialogue*, Wall Street Journal (18 Jan. 2024).

¹⁴ Holly Ellyatt, *Putin fears the US and NATO are militarizing space and Russia is right to worry, experts say*, CNBC (5 Dec. 2019).

¹⁵ Vladimir Putin, *Presidential Address to Federal Assembly* (21 Feb. 2023), available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/70565>.

¹⁶ Steven Pifer, *Commentary: Russia's shifting views of multilateral nuclear arms control with China*, Brookings (19 Feb. 2020).

¹⁷ Peter Brookes, *The U.S. Should Address the Threat from Russia's Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons*, The Heritage Foundation (15 July 2022).

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mutually reinforcing one another to preserve stability.¹⁸ Scoping its deterrence breadth, the US holds the stated position that it aims to deter Russia, China, and North Korea simultaneously in peacetime, crisis, and conflict.¹⁹ And with respect to arms control, US analysts and legislators historically have placed a significant focus on counterpart compliance in implementation, reasoning that arms control measures work only when adhered to, and that non-compliance (or uncertainty as to compliance) poses a risk of the adversary gaining undue advantage. This compliance premium lends itself to a near-sacred position that arms control measures must be verifiable,²⁰ along with aggressive public positions on Russian instances of non-compliance.²¹ To address perceived threats from Russia and China—varying in their nature and scope—US positions in the Trump (1.0) and Biden administrations have generally shown an eagerness to reach controls on both nuclear arsenals, while also taking stock of the United States' own inventories and the US ability to fulfill its deterrence and assurance aims.²² In that vein, the US has cautiously signaled a willingness to quantitatively increase nuclear weapons deployments if current nuclear arms trends continue,²³ though the Biden Administration specifically stipulated that the US would abide by the central limits of the New START Treaty for the duration of the Treaty as long as it assesses that Russia continues to do so.²⁴ The US ambition to reach controls on the Chinese arsenal was tempered by realism during the Biden Administration, which focused more on substantive dialogue with China as a discrete starting point, with increased transparency and understanding as a suggested near-term milestone.²⁵ The Trump (2.0) Administration has, in its early days, made public statements reviving the ambition of arms control with both Russia and China.²⁶

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *2018 Nuclear Posture Review* (Feb. 2018) (“Trump 2018 NPR”), pp. 72-73; U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* [within the *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*] (27 Oct. 2022) (“Biden 2022 NPR”), p. 16.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States* (07 Nov. 2024).

²⁰ E.g., Biden 2022 NPR, p. 16; Trump 2018 NPR, p. 73.

²¹ See generally U.S. Department of State, *Reports: Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, available at <https://www.state.gov/adherence-to-and-compliance-with-arms-control-nonproliferation-and-disarmament-agreements-and-commitments/> (yearly index of reports).

²² E.g., Biden 2022 NPR; Trump 2018 NPR. See also U.S. Embassy in Mali, *Statement by President Trump in Support of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty on the Occasion of its 50th Anniversary* (05 March 2020) (“I will be proposing a bold new trilateral arms control initiative with Russia and China to help avoid an expensive arms race and instead work together to build a better, safer, and more prosperous future for all.”).

²³ Remarks from Pranay Vaddi, *Adapting the U.S. Approach to Arms Control and Nonproliferation to a New Era*, Arms Control Association (7 June 2024) (“Absent a change in the trajectory of adversary arsenals, we may reach a point in the coming years where an increase from current deployed numbers is required . . . In an evolving security environment with multiple adversaries who are making nuclear weapons more central to their national security strategies, it may be necessary to adapt current U.S. force capability, posture, composition, or size in order to be able to fulfill the three stated roles of nuclear weapons.”).

²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States* (07 Nov. 2024).

²⁵ *Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan for the Arms Control Association (ACA) Annual Forum*, White House (02 June 2023).

²⁶ Andrea Shalal & Steve Holland, *Trump says he wants to work with Russia, China on limiting nuclear weapons*, Reuters (13 Feb. 2025).

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US interests in strategic stability begin from the obvious: a mushroom cloud over the United States, its allies, or its partners would be catastrophic for US interests, as would any other mass attack. Plus, arms racing is expensive. More broadly, the United States has enjoyed a position of economic, geopolitical, and military advantage since the end of the Second World War and led the international community in establishing a set of international norms and rules that tend to benefit the United States financially and geopolitically. The United States seeks to preserve that advantage, along with the norms and rules, as best it can. But US analysts perceive the advantage to be slipping, and strategic nuclear parity with Russia no longer accommodates US interests in the face of China's large-scale nuclear buildup. Those dynamics cause existing US interests in maintaining strong alliances and avoiding overmatch by adversaries to quickly become more acute. And although the US-Russia relationship consists of a rich nuclear arms control history, Beijing's disinterest so far in arms control combined with its immense nuclear buildup complicates for the United States whether that well-trodden US-Russia dynamic ought to continue. Russia—the United States' only nuclear peer—remains an “acute threat” in US eyes. So all else equal, US interests would be furthered by a deterrence-arms control recipe facilitating strategic stability in the US-Russia relationship—particularly with a Russian leadership cadre that appears to be risk-acceptant. But those interests must balance against the US strategy's primary focus on competing with China and upholding global status quos against Beijing-sought changes to the international security order. Debate rages in Washington about the precise scope of Beijing's long-term aims—whether China pursues a regional approach aimed at the demise of US security ties and influence in Asia, or whether instead it pursues ambitions of global dominance. But at bottom, some points of wide consensus have emerged, first among them that China must be the primary focus of US strategy, as it is the only state “with the intent, will, and capability to reshape the international order.”²⁷ Finally, the United States maintains an interest in avoiding nuclear attack from smaller states such as North Korea or the threat of a nuclear Iran.

The US's BATNA serving its strategic interests over the foreseeable future probably is to live with a threatening Russia, a nuclear-expanding China, and a high-risk North Korea by establishing a modest campaign by historical standards to quantitatively increase deployed nuclear arms, continuing to form a pattern of reliable state practice in the form of risk reduction measures with China,²⁸ and retain minimal Cold War-era agreements that facilitate risk reduction

²⁷ Jim Garamone, *DOD Report Details Chinese Efforts to Build Military Power*, Dep't of Defense (19 Oct. 2023); see also *Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered)*, Dep't of Defense (12 Feb. 2025) (“We also face a peer competitor in the Communist Chinese with the capability and intent to threaten our homeland and core national interests in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. is prioritizing deterring war with China in the Pacific, recognizing the reality of scarcity, and making the resourcing tradeoffs to ensure deterrence does not fail.”).

²⁸ Hui Zhang, *China's openness about its latest nuclear missile test shows growing confidence vis-à-vis the United States*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (16 Oct. 2024); Natalia Drozdiak, *US Hails Early Notice of China ICBM Test to Avoid Miscalculation*, Bloomberg (25 Sep. 2024); Chris Gordon, *Behind the Scenes of a Minuteman ICBM Launch with Three Test Warheads*, Air & Space Forces Magazine (06 Nov. 2024) (“The U.S. also provided advance notice to China, a DOD spokesperson told Air & Space Forces Magazine. China notified the U.S. of an ICBM

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measures with Russia. To compensate for a decline in the value of strategic nuclear parity with Russia amid China's nuclear rise, US interests would be best served by preserving or regaining its advantages in non-nuclear military and technology fields by prioritizing those fields in its allied and domestic public and private sectors, while hindering as best as possible China's and Russia's progress in those fields.

2.4. France and the UK

Since the Cold War, France and the United Kingdom have maintained independent and non-committal positions towards arms control, as is demonstrated by their refusal to participate in the US-Soviet SALT and INF talks. Abstaining from these negotiations was a strategy to enhance their deterrence, as the reductions undertaken by the US and the Soviet Union/Russia had the effect of increasing the relative French and British second-strike potential. Their abstention reflects the constraints of the relatively modest French and British nuclear arsenals compared to those of the US and the Soviet Union/Russia. This disparity has and continues to necessitate a strategic emphasis on credible second-strike capabilities, owing to relatively limited means to address the first-strike risk. Military technological developments and the war in Ukraine raised both countries' concerns over the risk of a direct nuclear confrontation between Russia and Europe, which could potentially motivate London and Paris to engage in arms control discussions in the future. Unlike France,²⁹ the UK has not shown any explicit interest in arms control in recent years. And as a matter of power dynamics, British or French engagement with Russia in arms control is difficult to imagine without at least tacit US approval and progress in the US-Russian arms control track to open the door.

France's and the UK's interests include: First, to reduce Russian first-strike capability against Europe. This interest has increased in prominence in recent years due to technological developments in the Russian nuclear arsenal with intermediate-range, high-precision capabilities introduced. The war in Ukraine has illustrated that the use of conventional capabilities could give both Paris and London additional instruments to bolster the European deterrence posture, motivating them to invest in hypersonic weapons and other advanced, non-second strike capabilities. With respect to these capabilities, arms control appears more conducive to the UK and France—and indeed, when discussing a test of a new French hypersonic system, French President Emmanuel Macron stipulated his position that these technologies are developed to give Europeans more instruments in possible future arms control negotiations.³⁰ Diverging from US interests, the fast development of nuclear INF capabilities presents much greater risk for Paris and London than do Moscow's strategic nuclear missiles, as the INF range would be more suitable for use against targets in Europe. The UK's and France's steps to being development of conventional INF-range missiles also speaks to their interest in mitigating or counterbalancing this threat. Accordingly, control and regulation governing missiles in the INF

launch over the Pacific Ocean in September. There is no formal agreement between Washington and Beijing that requires such notifications, but each side provided them to avoid miscalculations.”).

²⁹ Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, at the Munich Security Conference, *Elysee* (17 Feb. 2023).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

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range might especially further both countries' interests. Second, both states of course maintain their key interest in reducing risks of nuclear escalation in Europe and of nuclear war generally. Possible ways to achieve this goal include discussion of risk-reduction and confidence-building measures of the sort previously dismissed. For example, during the NPT Preparatory Committees for XI Review Conference France opined repeatedly that risk-reduction discussions might be conducive to arms control dialogue.³¹ In addition, the increased salience of tactical nuclear warheads in the Russian nuclear doctrine and NATO concerns over the potential use of so-called "gradual nuclear escalation" in the war in Ukraine might bring tactical nuclear matters more concretely onto the UK's and France's arms control agendas. Paris and London's interests also include the general improvement of European security and the end of the war in Ukraine, maintaining their relationships with the US, and avoiding excessive budgetary burdens— a more sensitive interest than the other NWS, by comparison.

France and the UK's **BATNA** lies in encouraging the maintenance of arms control measures that regulate the Russian arsenal (namely via US-Russia processes), continuing to increase investment in their own military high-technology and maintaining US defense relations—particularly nuclear defense commitments. France and the UK's abstention from arms control agreements will likely continue unless those agreements facilitate further reductions by Russia and the United States supports their engagement in arms control.

3. Zones of Possible Agreement

Based on the interests and BATNAs identified, this section assesses where a ZOPA might lie between various selected party-sets.

3.1. US-Russia Bilateral

As it stands today, an issue key to both sides' interests prevents their dialogue on arms control: the war in Ukraine. Resolution—or simply an end—to that war can foreseeably remove a key impediment to the pursuit of agreements or arrangements furthering both sides' interests. Subsequently, a renewed US-Russia arms control agenda might take the shape of two major frameworks. First, rather than treaty-making, the two sides could pursue a general resumption of the arms control talks that might in the future lead to modest informal arrangements. This could include the resumption of the Strategic Stability Dialogue (suspended in 2022) and negotiations on specific nuclear risk reduction measures, such as a moratorium on the deployment of INF-range missiles in Europe, establishing reciprocal unilateral measures to adhere to the New START central limits after New START expiration, or the limited resumption of numerical data exchange. Second, the two sides could pursue a concrete, more comprehensive deal either similar to New START or an agreement with more fundamental changes such as the inclusion of new nuclear-capable weapon systems, anti-ballistic missile systems, and tactical nuclear weapons, or even lower ceilings on deployed strategic weapons (i.e., deeper cuts).

³¹ Intervention de l'Ambassadrice Camille Petit Cheffe de délégation de la France, *Reaching Critical Will* (22 Jul. 2024).

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Of these options, the first, more modest option, likely falls within the US-Russia ZOPA. Restarting arms control dialogue does not harm either side's respective identified interests and may even further some of their interests should the dialogue evolve well. A more comprehensive deal probably falls outside of the US-Russia ZOPA. Although such a deal would probably advance Russia's interests more than the Russian BATNA would, the US BATNA probably better serves US interests than a bilateral deal that restrains US inventories and fails to account for China's nuclear buildup. Accordingly, such a deal enters the ZOPA only if it contains additional elements to serve US interests, such as Russian obligations that hinder Russia-China cooperation. In the alternative, i.e., in the event of some sort of comprehensive US-Russia deal, potential Russian options to engage the UK and France open up, such as exploring measures to reduce the risks of hypersonics, dual-capable INF-range missiles, and tactical nuclear weapons arsenals.

3.2. US-Russia-China Trilateral (or US-China Bilateral)

The notion of a US-Russia-China trilateral agreement is premised on the fact that both US and Russian interests are served by a more inclusive framework that accounts for China's military capabilities (although Moscow has been less vocal than the US, especially in recent years). For China, this modality is usually firmly rejected on the rationale that it would pose a major threat to China's interest in ensuring its second-strike/retaliation capabilities by pressuring Beijing to limit its nuclear development at a time when it is far behind the other two countries. In this case, China prefers its own BATNA of growing its arsenal to the degree that its retaliation capabilities are secured without engaging in binding nuclear arms control processes.

This trilateral modality could only become feasible if it includes elements that serve China's interests more compellingly than China's BATNA. For example, China's various interests might be served enough to consider a trilateral deal if the US were to take dramatic inducing steps, such as demonstrating a credible willingness to address China's interest in developing stable big-power (US-China) relations by, for example, loosening high-tech export controls in the name of recognizing China as a partner rather than a threat, by more concretely discouraging Taiwan independence, or by committing to limits on qualitative development of high-precision damage limitation capabilities in exchange for quantitative caps on the Chinese and Russian arsenals. Depending on the details, US interests overall might remain well served by such a deal, since Washington would retain other military and geopolitical advantages over Beijing, serving key US interests. A more stable US-China relationship could also serve the US interest in safeguarding the security and territorial integrity of US allies and partners. Therefore, it seems that by meeting these conditions, the US, Russia, and China could share a ZOPA. Notably, a US-China bilateral modality, omitting Russia—a framework currently strongly opposed by China over the same concerns as a trilateral deal—could also enter the ZOPA if these conditions are met.

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3.3. P5 Multilateral Deal

Possibilities for a revived arms control agenda that includes all P5 states is a viable option if the perception continues to build that the nuclear balance of power is shifting away from the United States and Russia. As China's nuclear arsenal continues to grow, most likely making the continuation of US-Russia bilateral processes unacceptable (mainly for the US), so will the notion (driven by Russia) that the UK and France must also be included in this process. However, as Washington and Moscow are mainly interested in preserving their nuclear superiority over China, the UK, and France, they would almost certainly insist that the modalities of such a deal reflect and seal the current status quo dynamic among the five. One breakthrough scenario in this sense is if the latter three agreed to cap the size of their nuclear forces (at a level they can even build up to, over time), in exchange for the quantitative status quo or further reductions on the part of Russia and the US. This would, in effect, support the above-mentioned trend of shifting the nuclear balance of power away from the US and Russia while avoiding the prospect for unrestricted nuclear buildups and reassuring Washington that it has reduced the risk of the most nightmarish China nuclear breakout predictions.

A plausible P5 multilateral deal might take any number of other shapes. An ambitious, yet plausible deal could consist of a multilateral agreement that combines the philosophy of five-way varying New START-style ceilings/reductions (primarily serving US and Russian interests) with INF-range disarmament commitments (primarily serving UK and French interests) and a legally binding pledge to non-first-use of nuclear weapons or some of the more dramatic inducing steps discussed in the above trilateral context (primarily serving Chinese interests). Indeed, the prospect that China's BATNA serves China's interests more than this deal structure probably poses the biggest threat to such a deal. But as the security environment continues to shift, altering each party's BATNA by the year, a continuous US deployment of INF-range missiles in Asia might shift China's BATNA enough for it to seek out such INF-range restrictions. A collateral motivation for China, the UK, and France to join the US and Russia in a new deal could be the shared interest in the preservation of the global nonproliferation norms and enhancement of their international standing as members of the NPT, bound by its Article VI obligation to engage in arms control negotiations. Such a deal could also boost the parties' shared interest in projecting a reputable image of responsible NWS behavior in the face of international discontent with nuclear trends, as exemplified most starkly by the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Finally, a P5 multilateral deal might take a tiered shape, with the US and Russia bound to a comprehensive set of limits similar to New START, with China, the UK, and France subjected to a more modest set of transparency, confidence-building, and risk-reduction measures. In this scenario, a US-Russia implementation body would meet separately from a larger five-way recurring implementation body. This structure would serve US and Russian interests in understanding more about the Chinese, UK, and French arsenals and their changes over time, and would serve the Chinese, UK, and French interests in preserving a comprehensive US-Russia arms control framework.

Conclusions

In assessing the feasibility of agreement structures and whether, in fact, they are in a mutual settlement zone, some common takeaways emerge. In particular:

- The deteriorating global security environment and the growing risks of a conflict with large-scale dimensions (including the use of nuclear weapons) have led to an increased international focus on preserving strategic stability. But in that newly emerging international order, the probability of legally or politically binding arms control agreements or even less formal arrangements is impeded by established competitors' (the US's and Russia's) persisting perception that their alternatives to a deal serve their interests better than an agreement in bilateral form, namely due to both of their desires to add more factors and new states (China, the UK, and France) into the equation to address their perceived disadvantages.
- In the short term, a policy to maximize the possibility of an arms control agreement would seem to require including regional security issues other than pure nuclear issues within nuclear talks.. This is particularly the case in the current status of the US-Russia and US-China relationships: While the US prefers issue compartmentalization, Russia associates the war in Ukraine and its perceived threat from NATO expansion with its arms control agenda, whereas China links broader bilateral relations and regional security issues (such as US policies on Taiwan) with the China-US arms control process.
- Although formal arms control agreement seems nearly inconceivable in the current context, several shared interests can still be identified. First, the P5 interests align in mitigating the destabilizing effects of novel technologies on strategic stability. Second, assuming a sufficient degree of political will remains, each side's interest in sustaining credible deterrence relationships implies a shared interest in at least keeping dialogue alive to facilitate the communicative elements of deterrence. Third, reducing the risks of nuclear escalation—in particular, those exacerbated by volatile regional dynamics—implies that arms control dialogue might be more appealing especially in or after a crisis. Fourth, each side shares an interest in avoiding the significant expenditures associated with a nuclear arms race, and would stand to fiscally benefit from setting ceilings, if not reductions.
- Pessimism on arms control prospects can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies harmful to a country's own interests. In a fraught security environment, the notion of universalizing existing or negotiating new nuclear arms control agreements seems entirely infeasible. This dire environment can lead to rhetoric and positions that begin from fatalistic assumptions, which, in turn, have the effect of narrowing the ZOPA—or extinguish them altogether. These trends are dangerous and analytically wrong. Opportunities to mitigate stability challenges still exist, and although of limited nature they can still have an important stabilizing role.
- As evidenced by past politico-military crises such as those during the Cold War, ZOPAs might quickly open, prompted by the evolution of the technological or military realities

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between adversaries or strategic competitors (currently the US-China, US-Russia, NATO-Russia relationships). So too, today. Slow-moving nuclear dynamics with decades-long maturation can create a temptation toward assuming these dynamics always move slowly. P5 states put themselves in the best posture to serve their interests when they resist that temptation and remain vigilantly ready to negotiate and seize agreement opportunities when they arise.

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