

The United States, China, and Nuclear Arms Control: Time for a Creative Spark

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Earlier this summer, President Barack Obama gave a landmark speech in Berlin to reinvigorate a nuclear arms control agenda that has languished since the ratification of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in late 2010. If Obama puts his words into action, the next step will be a follow-on treaty between the United States and Russia. This new treaty would cap deployed strategic warheads at approximately 1,000, and could tackle weapons systems that have not been addressed before, including tactical nuclear weapons and missile defense, though there is thus far little agreement on scope.

While the United States and Russia have a responsibility to draw down their arsenals, these bilateral nuclear reductions will be increasingly difficult if other nuclear powers do not join in. President Vladimir Putin has expressed Russia's reluctance to participate in further reductions with the United States without the participation of other nuclear powers. To break the existing deadlock, it is time to engage the so-called "second tier" nuclear powers, especially China. The evolution of the US-China strategic relationship can affect the next stages of international arms control, even if China does not directly participate.

Possible unilateral steps

Though it is unfair to expect China to directly participate in nuclear arms reductions at this stage, there is much that China can do unilaterally to facilitate the negotiation of the next US-Russia arms control treaty. While China's decision to not divulge the exact number of nuclear weapons in its possession ought to be respected, Beijing can and should provide explicit assurances that it has no intention to "sprint to parity." The United States and Russia are both concerned that further reductions in their arsenals may prompt China to rapidly increase the size of its own, and such a commitment could help alleviate such fears.

China also needs to provide more clarity on how its policy of "minimum deterrence" could change as the US deploys missile defense technologies in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States would welcome further Chinese indications that the sole purpose of China's nuclear arsenal is to pursue

credible and effective nuclear deterrence, and that first strike capabilities will not be developed regardless of external developments.

The lack of engagement between the United States and China on missile defense is problematic. In spite of some progress in track 1.5 discussions, missile defense remains an area of great misunderstanding between the two countries and both need to provide further details about their respective intentions. As China is making important decisions about its modernization program and its own missile defense development, a US initiative to address this topic would be in its interest. Style is in many cases as important as substance, and gesturing toward rapprochement on this issue could serve as a strong confidence-building measure. This could prevent China from feeling antagonized by the United States, and prompt more Chinese openness to discussing its own ABM programs.

As the United States reaches out to China, discussion should not be limited to strategic missile defense. The United States is determined to use *theater* missile defense systems to protect allies and its own military assets in the Asia-Pacific region from conventional missile attacks. These theater missile defense capabilities, in theory, would also be able to counter Chinese short- and medium-range nuclear missiles, some of which may be co-located with conventional missile units. An effective dialogue would need to start from a candid exchange of views on how both kinds of missile defense will impact nuclear stability.

Discussions about advanced conventional weaponry could also be fruitful. Beijing sees the US development and deployment of conventional strategic weapons – including conventional prompt global strike capabilities and other advanced conventional weapons such as X47B – as a potential game changer that could undermine its nuclear retaliation capability. To alleviate Chinese concerns, the United States can step up efforts to reaffirm – at every possible opportunity – its policy of not using conventional strategic weapons to undermine Chinese nuclear deterrence. This could be done in a manner that would not restrict US technology development and deployment. Top US officials have repeatedly stated that these conventional systems are not aimed at countering Chinese nuclear capability. The reassuring tone of these statements, however, has been undercut by contradictory voices within US domestic debates and policy discussions. It would be helpful for the US government to clearly and explicitly embrace a policy of no conventional strikes on Chinese nuclear targets and convey this message to Chinese leaders.

Possible cooperative steps

There are also a number of joint steps that the two countries can take to improve mutual confidence.

Given a dynamic of high tensions and conventional arms buildups in the Asia-Pacific, it is never too early to engage in discussions on how to contain and prevent confrontations from escalating into nuclear conflict. Though it may be premature to propose official bilateral dialogues on nuclear signaling, potential escalation scenarios, or inadvertent nuclear escalation, it is possible to develop confidence-building mechanisms on basic practices. For instance, the two countries can work on table-top crisis simulation exercises on common security threats: simulations of a nuclear terrorist incident or a nuclear smuggling incident could help both nations understand each other's behavior in crisis situations, and could lead to discussions about what kind of sensitive information can be shared with the other party.

The United States and China can furthermore start a dialogue on counting rules for nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles. Under New START counting rules, China would theoretically have zero nuclear warheads because it decouples warheads and delivery systems. So a new, mutually acceptable counting system must be created to engage China in future nuclear arms control efforts. The United States could encourage China to develop its own rules, which Chinese experts say China does not have, and share them with the United States, so that a discussion can take place on how to coordinate their respective counting principles. Through candid exchanges during the Track II Strategic Nuclear Dialogues organized by the Pacific Forum, experts from both sides recognized the critical need for a common vocabulary on specific arms control topics. A dialogue on counting rules would be a substantive first step toward building a common vocabulary and a shared framework which are imperative for reducing misunderstandings before actual disarmament talks can commence.

While reaching agreements on limiting or reducing their active nuclear arsenals will be very difficult, addressing issues on the back-end of nuclear arms control, such as verification of the dismantlement of retired nuclear weapons, is another – and perhaps easier – avenue for dialogue. Because developing common procedures for verifiable warhead dismantlement takes time, both countries should task their scientists and engineers to work with their counterparts sooner rather than later. Though the United States maintains an aversion to sensitive scientific cooperation with China since the late 1990s, such scientific cooperation can be conducted multilaterally, possibly within P-5 framework, as a means of reducing any domestic political risk.

Conclusion

The steps outlined above are not exhaustive, but are intended to provide a sample of the possible measures the United States and China could adopt – individually or together – to inject a new dynamism into their nuclear relations. Though non-governmental organizations and think tanks have sought to prod our two governments, it is about time for new ideas to be tested at an official level, as maintaining the status quo will eventually amplify mistrust and therefore damage strategic stability. The benefits of taking a creative approach to nuclear arms control discussions would be felt in all other aspects of the US-China relationship, and contribute to a more cooperative kind of major power relations.