



Establishing new dialogue between the Chinese and US Congresses by Hu Gaochen

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In recent years, China and the United States have developed various dialogues to address concerns about the nuclear policies of the other side and to strengthen cooperation on nuclear stability and nuclear nonproliferation. The efforts are in the national interests of both countries and are beneficial for regional security and stability. The dialogues involve different departments and experts in the executive branches and militaries of the two countries and nongovernmental scholars. The congresses of the two countries are not yet part of the dialogue process, however.

This oversight is important as both legislatures play key roles in making strategic nuclear policy. Their opinions have direct influence on the formality and legality of other nuclear dialogues. The Chinese and US legislatures should develop a nuclear dialogue. Their participation in China-US nuclear dialogues can help reduce suspicions of the other side by providing a full spectrum of views.

The Chinese and the US congresses

The Chinese Congress includes the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (NPC) and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). They are the supreme legislative and supervisory institutions in China. There are 2,987 NPC deputies and 2,227 CPPCC members in the 12th Session of NPC and CPPCC. Many of the NPC deputies and CPPCC members are current or retired government and military officials, scientists, entrepreneurs, scholars, artists, and professionals in other areas. Most are not full-time at their NPC and CPPCC offices in Beijing (meaning that they have other jobs).

The NPC has eight special congressional committees responsible for various issues and one is on foreign affairs. CPPCC has nine special congressional committees; one of these is on foreign affairs too. The Foreign Affairs Committees of NPC and CPPCC have significant influences on China's foreign policy, including bilateral diplomacy issues and multilateral negotiations.

The US Congress has 535 congressional representatives in the House and Senate. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, US senators and representatives work full-time in Congress. There are 16 special committees in the Senate responsible for appropriations, armed services, foreign relations, budget, homeland security and governmental affairs, and so on. The House of Representatives has 21 professional congressional

committees responsible for appropriations, armed services, foreign affairs, science, space and technology, and so on.

In the US Congress, eight committees are closely relevant to strategic nuclear policy. They are the US Senate Committees on (1) Appropriations, (2) Armed Services, (3) Foreign Relations and (4) Energy and Natural Resources; and the US House Committees on (5) Appropriations, (6) Armed Services, (7) Foreign Affairs and (8) Science, Space and Technology. However, none save the committees on foreign affairs have Chinese counterparts.

Roles of congresses in strategic nuclear policy decisions

The failure to include legislatures in China-US nuclear dialogue makes it difficult to address some important issues, for example, how the two countries can develop and stabilize their nuclear dialogues.

China and the United States had good cooperation in negotiations for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in the early 1990s. Although the two countries signed the treaty in 1996, neither congress ratified it. The reasons why the congresses have not yet ratified CTBT may be different, but the results are the same: the treaty cannot enter into force, thus nullifying the two governments' efforts to create an effective international institution.

In the 2011 federal budget, Rep. Frank Wolf inserted a clause prohibiting the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and NASA from any joint scientific activity with China. According to regulations, outer space experts from the two countries cannot communicate with each other and cannot participate in purely scientific meetings organized by each other. The direct consequence is that China and the US cannot hold a professional dialogue on outer space issues. This prevents experts from the two countries from establishing friendship and trust.

Another similar issue is the Cox Report. Published in the House of Representatives in 1998, the report charges that technology and information were transferred to China and contributed to the enhancement of ICBMs and SLBMs. This report has had a serious impact on China-US relations, and dialogue between national laboratories of the two countries has been terminated and contact between the nuclear scientists still cannot recover.

Plainly, the US Congress has great impact on nuclear policy. Direct engagement in the nuclear dialogue between China and the US by members of Congress and their staff will help them better understand the value and difficulty of such dialogues.

Like their US counterparts, the Chinese NPC and CPPCC also have influence on government decisions on national security, arms control, and other important issues.

Since the legislatures are important players in both countries, they – meaning representatives and staff – should engage on strategic nuclear issues as a supportive and supplementary mechanism of existing dialogues. Specifically, they should take the following four steps.

First, they should develop working-level dialogue between congressional staffs. Subjects are not critical in the initial engagement. Rather, they should try to build a constructive atmosphere and mutual friendship and trust. Staff attending the dialogue should have relevant backgrounds in the military, diplomacy, nuclear issues, or space technology. The topics and contents of the working-level dialogue should be diverse, such as strategic trust, military transparency, technical cooperation, and international and regional hot issues. A working-level dialogue provides a basis for future dialogue. If the first engagements are successful, follow-on dialogues can be arranged.

Second, a dialogue between the foreign affairs committees of both legislatures should be established. Both the NPC and CPPCC have committees on foreign affairs with significant influence on security and strategic affairs. Representatives from the two legislatures could exchange views on national security and arms control issues from the viewpoint of foreign relations if they can establish a dialogue mechanism. Topics should be flexible. The heads of these committees should exchange visits and carry out regular meetings.

Third, the dialogues should develop specific topics. To expand and deepen the dialogue, there should be special sessions for different professional topics such as those relating to national security and arms control. To address specific issues, the participants need special backgrounds.

Two problems need to be addressed. The first concerns the different backgrounds of participants from each country. Some members of the Chinese NPC and CPPCC are PLA generals, nuclear and space scientists, and managers of the defense industry. They have the military and technology background that allows them to discuss specific nuclear issues. Most US senators and representatives are professional politicians and may not have similar experiences like those of their Chinese counterparts.

However, senators and representatives have assistants who are experts on nuclear issues and can help them prepare for dialogue with Chinese counterparts. The Congressional Research Service (CRS), a public policy research arm of the US Congress, has staff working on nuclear issues. It can provide assistance to representatives in the dialogue.

The second concern is about the composition of the two congresses. The US Congress has eight congressional committees related to nuclear issues while there are only two foreign affairs committees in the Chinese NPC and CPPCC related to the issue. Therefore, the Chinese NPC and CPPCC should set up an internal mechanism to select participants and to arrange dialogues with US counterparts related to nuclear issues. The internal mechanism should summon NPC and CPPCC members who have the necessary background to join panel discussions. This will ensure that Chinese representatives can match their US counterparts.

For example, the Chinese NPC and CPPCC can summon members who are retired generals to have dialogue with the Armed Services Committees. The different professional topics could make the dialogue more specific and the outcomes will be more constructive.

Finally, a dialogue between senior leaders in both legislatures should be established. Dialogues between different levels of representatives and staff and on various topics provide the basis for top-level dialogue. Dialogue between senior leaders should include the Chinese chairman, vice chairman, and members of the Standing Committee of NPC and CPPCC; the US side should include Senate party leaders and assistant leaders, speaker of the House, majority and minority leaders, and majority and minority House whips.

Top-level dialogue between the Chinese and US legislatures should be strategic as specific topics should have already been discussed at the senior and middle levels. This meeting would be last, summarizing the achievements of a year's worth of dialogue and set the tone for the next year.

Conclusion

Both the Chinese and US legislatures play important roles in making strategic policy in each country. Thus, a dialogue mechanism between the two congresses would be very valuable. It should enhance mutual understanding and mutual trust between the two countries. A four-step process can help develop congressional dialogue. The entire process includes different participants from the working level staff to senior representatives, with different topics ranging from the specific to the strategic.

Dialogue between the two congresses will be an important new channel for the two countries. If developed, it would allow staff and representatives of the two countries to explain their special concerns on nuclear issues: for example, why they have reservations on CTBT and how a balance between national secrecy and dialogue can be maintained. The discussions in this kind of dialogue may be bolder and more innovative. Some new ideas may be generated to stabilize China-US nuclear relations.

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