

## **Transparency with Chinese Characteristics**

by Nikita Perfilyev

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On Jan. 9 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates traveled to China in a bid to revitalize dialogue on military-to-military relations that broke off after the United States announced a multibillion-dollar arms package sale to Taiwan. One of the issues that the US has unsuccessfully tried to engage China in the past is transparency of China's nuclear arsenal. With New START ratified by the Senate and an upcoming ratification of the treaty by the Russian Duma, it is crucial to consider next steps in nuclear reductions and gradual multilateralization of the disarmament process. And while the larger process of disarmament would benefit from increased Chinese transparency, there is little doubt that China would gain as well.

Increased transparency among nuclear powers will be essential to moving to lower numbers, as will a change in states' attitudes toward nuclear secrecy more broadly. The Disarmament Action Plan agreed to at the May 2010 NPT Review Conference encourages nuclear-weapon states to develop a standard reporting format for their policies aimed at achieving a world without nuclear weapons. It is generally agreed that information about nuclear arsenals and weapons-grade fissile material stock should be a part of such reporting. This confidence-building measure would promote political momentum for nuclear disarmament and contribute to the pursuit of a nuclear-weapons free world.

Such transparency can also help remove the mistrust about motives and intentions between nuclear-weapon states and some non-nuclear weapon states, especially members of the Non-Aligned Movement. Non-aligned states would prefer that such declarations be verifiable, but at a minimum, a publicly accessible repository of information provided by nuclear weapons states as mandated in the 2010 Disarmament Action Plan would be a first step. Additionally, increased transparency will have a positive impact on strategic stability among nuclear-weapon states themselves.

In recent years, some nuclear-weapon states have become more transparent regarding their nuclear arsenals, at least for deployed weapons. During the NPT Review Conference, the US announced that it had 5,113 active nuclear warheads. After the election of the new government, the United Kingdom disclosed that it had 225 nuclear weapons, 160 of which are deployed. France stated several years ago that it has no more than 300 warheads. While Russia indicated that it would consider making a similar disclosure after ratification of the New START Treaty, it has provided significant levels of

transparency within the framework of START I data exchange. All four countries also declared a moratorium on the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes.

China, however, has never disclosed the size of its arsenal. During the Review Conference, China insisted that reporting should be done without prejudice to national security, blocked wording on declaring a global moratorium on the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes, and opposed the inclusion of any language either directly mandating reductions or opposing the growth of nuclear arsenals by nuclear-weapon states.

Among the five official nuclear-weapon states, China is a special case. When it comes to describing the Chinese nuclear arsenal the most widely used phrase is "it is believed." China is believed to have stopped production of weapons-grade fissile material in the early 1990s, but it keeps this option open. China is believed to have approximately 200 deployed nuclear warheads with about 40 in storage. Pentagon reports note that in recent years China has increased its arsenal by 25 percent, the only official nuclear-weapon state to do so. While such reports conflate missile build-up with a possible increase in nuclear warheads, there is little doubt that the modernization of the solid-fuel, road-mobile ICBMs and construction of up to five strategic nuclear submarines contribute to the overall increase of China's nuclear arsenal.

The official Chinese position has been consistent for 50 years. Beijing insists that it has exercised the utmost restraint, maintains the lowest arsenal out of the five nuclear weapon states (which is questionable if one looks at the British nuclear forces), would never engage in a nuclear arms race, and that its policy will not change. Despite these statements, the veil of secrecy has led some experts to overestimate the capability of the Chinese nuclear arsenal and the speed of its modernization programs. Some wild speculations put the estimate of the nuclear arsenal at 1,000 warheads, making China the third largest nuclear-weapon state. While such estimates are likely to be grossly exaggerated, they demonstrate the uncertainty surrounding the Chinese nuclear program and justify military planning based on worst-case scenarios. A possible Chinese "sprint to parity," encouraged by further reductions in the US and Russian nuclear arsenals, is one worst-case scenario.

Despite the fact that there is little historical basis for believing that China would undertake such a leap, it is hard to justify a policy of further reductions when there is a mistrust of Chinese motives and intentions. While full transparency of Chinese intentions may not have been a decisive influence in the latest US-Russian arms control agreement, it will certainly produce greater Russian reluctance to pursue deeper reductions. Increased Chinese transparency will likely become a crucial prerequisite for future negotiations between Washington and Moscow on cuts in their arsenals.

Despite its official support for the complete prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons, China gave a cautious response to President Obama's Prague speech. For years, China has been a champion of nuclear disarmament pledges, while hiding behind the vast arsenals of the two nuclear superpowers. During the Cold War, China expressed its readiness to join the multilateral nuclear disarmament process when the US and the Soviet Union reduced their nuclear arsenals by 50 percent. When it became clear that such reductions were coming, China abandoned its previous rhetoric and now points to the need for reductions to levels comparable to that of China before it would consider joining the negotiations. Although the reduced US and Russian nuclear arsenals are still far from the Chinese level, greater political momentum toward nuclear disarmament and increased transparency of French and British nuclear forces have put pressure on China to demonstrate a more practical and less rhetorical commitment.

The driving force in US-Russian arms control has been the belief that transparency fosters predictability and predictability ensures stability. Although challenges in US-Russian relations persist, the New START agreement was signed more by partners than enemies. The same should be true for China, which no less than others, is interested in stability in order to secure economic growth. The critical point is that more predictability would enhance China's security, not diminish it.

Some Chinese leaders may argue that secrecy about China's nuclear forces enables them to rely on the doctrine of minimum deterrence supported by a smaller arsenal. They may say that the obligations of transparency are a responsibility of stronger states to assure weaker ones that their weakness will not be exploited. In the Chinese context, this argument has outlived its relevance. China today is not comparable to China 30 years ago. China's exploding economic growth enabled it to increase its military spending, leaving it with the second largest military budget – albeit still far from the United States.

China's nuclear modernization programs have also greatly increased the survivability of its nuclear forces: Its road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles are comparable to those of Russia. Last spring's US Nuclear Posture Review clearly states that the United States is ready to engage in a strategic dialogue with China for the sake of preserving strategic stability, a statement that falls just short of recognizing mutual vulnerability.

Despite the secrecy surrounding the Chinese nuclear arsenal, quality analysis on China's nuclear forces is available based on careful gathering of open source information. The recent report of the Project 2049 Institute on China's Nuclear Warhead Storage and Handling System is almost startling in its detail. If China indeed exercises the utmost restraint in its nuclear policy as it is believed and its disarmament pledges are meaningful, then China's security will not be diminished by an official endorsement of what is already known.

Finally, the United States in return could offer China more transparency on its missile defense plans as this is believed to be a driving factor behind China's modernization of its nuclear arsenal.

Instead of feeding a vicious circle of mistrust regarding motives and intentions, China has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to nuclear disarmament, quiet skeptics of the world free of nuclear weapons, and neutralize those who try to play a "China threat" card. The greatest beneficiary of such a change in policy would be China itself, which would enjoy the benefits of both enhanced stability and increased security.