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Hardening Chinese Realpolitik in the 21st Century: The Evolution of Beijing's Thinking about Arms Control

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ABSTRACT


Increasingly, policymakers, observers and scholars are calling for including China in nuclear arms-control efforts. Missing from debates, however, is a thorough analysis of Chinese perspectives. Drawing extensively on Chinese-language sources, this article traces the evolution of arms-control views among Chinese strategists and experts during the last decade. Updating earlier scholarship, we find that most Chinese strategists tend to view arms-control efforts through a strongly *realpolitik* prism. Many lament US domination of the arms-control agenda and believe US initiatives are intended to undermine Chinese nuclear deterrence. In recent years, these views have hardened. Chinese strategists increasingly see arms control as an arena for zero-sum military and political struggle.

Introduction

Many policymakers and observers point to China as an indispensable actor in future nuclear arms control efforts. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, leaders in several countries called on China to join a multilateral version of the treaty.¹ The administration of former US President Donald Trump long demanded that talks with Russia about extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) should be replaced with trilateral negotiations involving China.² While the current Joseph Biden administration supported the extension of New START, Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently stated that the US will pursue arms control with China.³

However, China has firmly rejected joining the INF and has expressed little interest in joining the United States and Russia in negotiations. While welcoming the New START extension, Chinese spokespersons recently expressed skepticism about US calls to include China in future talks, highlighting that 'There is an order-of-magnitude difference between the amount of China's nuclear weaponry and that of the United States and Russia.'⁴

Understanding Chinese perspectives is crucial to any effort to engage China on nuclear arms control and disarmament. Such knowledge furthermore may provide insight into China's thinking about security and international conflict more broadly, thereby contributing to policy and academic

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¹For Germany, see Robin Emmott, 'China Rebuffs Germany's Call for US Missile Deal with Russia', *Reuters*, 16 February 2019. For Japan, see 'Press Conference by Foreign Minister Taro Kono', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Japan, February 5, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken4e_000601.html.

²Eunjung Cho, 'White House Official: China Should Join Nuclear Arms Talks with Russia', *VOA News*, February 5, 2020, Accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/white-house-official-china-should-join-nuclear-arms-talks-russia>.

³Antony Blinken, 'On the Extension of the New START Treaty with the Russian Federation', Press Statement, February 3, 2021, Accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/on-the-extension-of-the-new-start-treaty-with-the-russian-federation/>.

⁴Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on February 5, 2021, Accessed February 15, 2021, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1851855.htm>.

discussions on Chinese foreign and security policy. However, most English-language literature that assessed Chinese perspectives on arms control dates to the 1990s and early-2000s. More recently, there have been excellent studies of Chinese perspectives and beliefs on nuclear escalation, assessments of strategic stability, and perceptions of US nuclear-weapons policy.⁵ There have also been studies of China's attitude to nuclear non-proliferation, which have exhibited a *realpolitik* approach.⁶ Beyond nuclear policy, scholars further have assessed Chinese views of other key security issues, such as the Korean peninsula and the US alliance system.⁷ On arms control, by contrast, existing scholarship is limited. Although some have debated the conditions under which China might join nuclear arms control, there have been no recent comprehensive studies of Chinese perspectives.⁸

This article maps the evolution of the debate about nuclear arms control among Chinese strategists and experts. To assess how the shifting international climate for nuclear arms control has affected views in China, the authors analyze and compare perspectives during the late-2000s/early-2010s to the late-2010s/early 2020s. During this decade, the nuclear arms-control enterprise moved from cautious optimism, particularly during the first period of Barack Obama's presidency, to a major unravelling.⁹ While the extension of New START represents a partial reversal, it remains to be seen how the policies of the Biden administration affect this overall tendency. The article emphasizes how Chinese analysts view US arms-control initiatives and nuclear policy as this is the central driver of China's nuclear policies.¹⁰ Analysis of US policy permeates all Chinese debates.

A consistent finding of studies from the 1990s and early 2000s was that Chinese strategists viewed arms control through a *realpolitik* lens. As China started engaging in and making commitments to arms control agreements, scholars argued that China's thinking had shifted away somewhat from the extremely suspicious, zero-sum worldview under Mao to a greater recognition that arms control could have a positive effect on Chinese security. Nonetheless, the influence of *realpolitik* notions in Chinese foreign policy remained strong.¹¹

In examining Chinese perspectives on nuclear arms control from the late-2000s and early-2010s, we find significant evidence of the enduring influence of *realpolitik* thought. Chinese analysts were primarily concerned about how arms control might affect its military security and its international image. Chinese observers were deeply skeptical of US intentions and have viewed its arms-control initiatives as efforts to preserve its military superiority and maintain a moral high ground.

⁵Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, 'Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and US-China Strategic Stability', *International Security* 40(2), (2015), pp. 7–50; Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, 'Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation', *International Security* 44(2), (2019), pp. 61–109; M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros, 'China's Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure', *International Security* 35(2), (2010), pp. 48–87; Thomasingar, 'Worrying about Washington: China's Views on the US Nuclear Posture', *The Nonproliferation Review* 18(1), (2011), pp. 51–68; Christopher P. Twomey, 'Nuclear Stability at Low Numbers: the Perspective from Beijing', *The Nonproliferation Review* 20(2), (2013), pp. 289–303; Eric Heginbotham, Jacob L. Heim and Christopher P. Twomey, 'Of Bombs and Bureaucrats: Internal Drivers of Nuclear Force Building in China and the United States', *The Journal of Contemporary China* 28(118), (2019): 537–57.

⁶Henrik Stålhane Hiim, *Strategic Assistance: China and International Nuclear Weapons Proliferation*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

⁷Xiangfeng Yang, 'Disenchanted Entanglement: the North Korean Shades of Grey on the Chinese Mind', *The Journal of Contemporary China* 29(123), (2020): 454–468; Adam P. Liff, 'China and the US Alliance System', *The China Quarterly* 233, (2018): 137–65.

⁸Stephen Cimbala, 'China's Strategic Nuclear Arms Control: Avoiding the "Thucydides Trap"', *Military and Strategic Affairs* 7(3), (2018): 79–91; Susan Turner Haynes, 'Dragon in the Room: Nuclear Disarmament's Missing Player', *Strategic Studies Quarterly*: SSQ 12(1), (2018): 25–47. A study that addressed Chinese perspectives on arms control but is somewhat dated is Lora Saalman, 'How Chinese Analysts View Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nuclear Deterrence After the Cold War,' in *Engaging China and Russia on Nuclear Disarmament*, ed. Christina Hansell and William C. Potter, (Monterey, CA: James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 2009), pp. 47–71.

⁹Michael Krepon, 'Reasons for the Great Unraveling of the Arms Control Enterprise,' *Arms Control Wonk*, February 26, 2017, Accessed April 9, 2020, <http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1202901/reasons-for-the-great-unraveling-of-the-arms-control-enterprise/>.

¹⁰Eric Heginbotham et al., *China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), xii.

¹¹Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), xxvii.

Furthermore, we find that the *realpolitik* paradigm and skepticism of the United States has hardened in China in recent years. This has been driven chiefly by developments in US nuclear policy that began with Obama's approval of major nuclear modernization. Trump's nuclear and arms-control policies bolstered this tendency, and thus far there are few signs of Chinese skepticism abating under the Biden administration. Many Chinese observers believe the United States is not only intensifying efforts to maintain its military superiority, but also attempting to damage China's international image through blame shifting. They are therefore highly pessimistic about the future of nuclear arms control; many regard it as an arena for zero-sum military and political struggle.

To assess Chinese perspectives and debates, this study utilizes an array of Chinese-language sources. Beyond official statements and publications, we examine the writings of civilian arms controllers and strategists, as well as texts written by scholars and analysts associated with the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Important sources on the views of PLA officers include publications by the Academy of Military Science (AMS), such as military journals and the 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy (Zhanlüexue)*, as well as yearbooks. The views of individual experts and strategists by no means should be understood to represent the thinking of China's top leaders, who ultimately decide Chinese policy. Nevertheless, taken together, the sources used herein likely reflect widely held opinions in the strategic community.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: The first part reviews the existing English-language literature about the evolution of China's arms-control and disarmament policies. The second part outlines Chinese thinking about arms control during the Obama presidency. The third part examines whether and how these views changed during the Trump presidency, as well as the sources of these shifts. The fourth section outlines how these broader views reflect in Chinese debates about specific arms-control arrangements and issue areas, including the INF treaty, the New START, and non-nuclear technologies that China regards as impacting strategic stability, such as missile defense. The fifth part examines some recent shifts in the Chinese rhetoric about arms control and their implications, such as claims that China should provide 'Chinese wisdom'. The sixth section concludes and outlines some implications the authors' findings may have for both scholarship and policy. In short, the results indicate that including China in arms control will be not only severely challenging, but also that arms control may increasingly turn into an arena of competition about narratives in which both the United States and China attempt to portray the other side's policies unfavorably.

Past Debates about China and Arms Control

From the early-1960s throughout most of the Cold War, the leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were highly skeptical of arms-control measures initiated by the superpowers. China not only rejected participating in arms-control arrangements, but also condemned the superpowers' initiatives. For example, in 1970, China denounced the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks as 'sham disarmament'.¹² Chinese leaders believed such agreements would favor Moscow and undermine the common struggle against the Soviet Union's so-called socialist imperialism.¹³ In addition, China regarded the arms-control movement as an effort by the superpowers to constrain China and maintain a nuclear monopoly.¹⁴

With Deng Xiaoping at the helm from the late-1970s, Chinese policies gradually shifted, and China began engaging in several arms-control regimes, including those that it criticized harshly in the past. During the 1980s and early-1990s, China formally acceded to the Biological Weapons Convention and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention, and

¹²Banning N. Garrett and Bonnie S. Glaser, 'Chinese Perspectives on Nuclear Arms Control.' *International Security* 20(3), 1995, p. 47.

¹³Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Learning versus Adaptation: Explaining Change in Chinese Arms Control Policy in the 1980s and 1990s.' *The China Journal* (Canberra, A.C.T.) 35, (1996) p. 34.

¹⁴Nicola Horsburgh, *China and Global Nuclear Order: From Estrangement to Active Engagement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 50, 67.

started to take a more active part in multilateral fora such as the Conference on Disarmament. In 1996, China signed the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), effectively agreeing to halt all testing of nuclear weapons.

China's increasing willingness to engage with arms-control regimes and processes was accompanied by a debate among Western scholars about the causes of this policy change. During the early to mid-1990s, most Western scholars argued that even if there had been a slight shift away from the rigid *realpolitik* paradigm of the Mao era, China still regarded its external environment as essentially conflictual and zero-sum, with military force remaining an efficient tool of statecraft. Accordingly, the shifts in Chinese arms control policy reflected continued *realpolitik* logic rather than a major ideational change in China's security paradigm. China thus sought to engage in arms-control arrangements that limited constraints on itself and maximized constraints on others while attempting to protect its international image. Moreover, this *realpolitik* worldview led to strong suspicions regarding the motives of other major powers such as the United States.¹⁵

In the late-1990s and early-2000s, some scholars saw evidence of a partial move in thinking away from the *realpolitik* attitude towards arms control. Through socialization in international organizations, Johnston argued that long-held *realpolitik* ideational structures softened somewhat among members of the Chinese decision-making apparatus. Due to processes such as mimicking, social influence and persuasion, Johnston said that China had adopted a more cooperative stance.¹⁶ Other studies saw evidence of similar processes in the nonproliferation area and claimed China internalized nonproliferation norms and started to view the spread of nuclear weapons as a security threat.¹⁷ However, Johnston was careful to highlight that not all Chinese leaders and officials had abandoned notions of *realpolitik*, and that the paradigm had not yet been supplanted as 'the predominant ideational construct behind China's foreign policy.'¹⁸ Thus, he argued that the rethink on arms control was a partial shift on a scale still dominated by a *realpolitik* paradigm.

Because the latest major studies of Chinese perspectives were conducted during the late-1990s and early- to mid-2000s, it is unclear whether or not China's partial rethink has proved lasting. China's international environment was relatively benign in the post-9/11 decade, but in the current climate where major power rivalry is intensifying, Chinese thinking might have shifted in a harder *realpolitik* direction. Put differently, a fragile socialization process might have been upended by shifts in China's material (or ideational) environment. Moreover, it is important to explore Chinese thinking about arms control arrangements that could put more significant constraints on its material capabilities. Most of the arms-control arrangements China agreed to during the 1990s did not constrain key capabilities such as China's nuclear arsenal. The CTBT is a possible exception, but the ultimate impact the treaty had on China's ability to modernize its nuclear weapons arsenal—and how well-prepared China was for a test ban—is contested.¹⁹

For these reasons, it is important to update the scholarship on Chinese perspectives on nuclear arms control. Examining the late-2000s to the present allows comparing China's perspectives during two distinct periods in international arms control. During the Obama presidency, there was a relatively strong US push for arms-control and disarmament efforts, even though scholars and analysts debated extensively how genuine these US initiatives were. Although tensions between China and the United States were increasing in this period, the great power rivalry was not yet as

¹⁵ Johnston, 'Learning versus Adaptation'; Garrett and Glaser, 'Chinese Perspectives'; see also Thomas J. Christensen, 'Chinese Realpolitik', *Foreign Affairs* 75(5), (1996), p. 37–52.

¹⁶ Johnston, *Social States*. For another account that points to somewhat similar explanations for shifts in Chinese policy, see Ann Kent, *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organization, and Global Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 102.

¹⁷ Evan S. Medeiros, *Reluctant Restraint: The Evolution of China's Nonproliferation Policies and Practices, 1980–2004*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 20. See also Michael D. Swaine, *America's Challenge: Engaging a Rising China in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), p. 234.

¹⁸ Johnston, *Social States*, p. xxvii.

¹⁹ For two differing views, see Johnston, *Social States*, p. 101; Jeffrey G. Lewis, *The Minimum Means of Retaliation: China's Search for Security in the Nuclear Age*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 114–121.

intense as under Trump. By contrast, the late-2010s and the Trump presidency have seen an unravelling of arms-control frameworks and an escalation in great power rivalry. The article also includes some of the initial Chinese assessments of the policies of the Biden administration.

Chinese Views on Arms Control during the Obama Era

In the writings of Chinese arms-control experts and strategists from the late-2000s and early- to mid-2010s, the authors find a strong tendency to focus on Chinese military security and China's international image. Many observers expressed ambivalence about the impact of arms control and disarmament initiatives on China and tended to be highly suspicious of US intentions. Put differently, most Chinese strategists continued to view arms control primarily through a realpolitik lens.

At first glance, the skepticism of Chinese observers contrasts with the international mood of the late-2000s and early-2010s. This period was characterized by relative optimism about the prospects for nuclear arms-control and disarmament, particularly due to apparent shifts in US policy. On 9 April 2009, the newly elected President Obama declared he would work for 'a world without nuclear weapons'.²⁰ In September of that year, the UN Security Council endorsed Obama's vision. By April 2010, the United States and Russia signed the New START, which limited the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 for each side. In its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) report, the US administration also highlighted the importance of bolstering arms control and signaled that it would reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US defense policy. At least rhetorically, this marked a significant shift away from the George W. Bush administration, which tended to be highly skeptical of arms control and withdrew the United States from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002.

Officially, China expressed support of Obama's vision for disarmament as well as the calls for a bolstered arms-control agenda. At the UN General Assembly in 2009, President Hu Jintao called for 'credible steps to push forward the nuclear disarmament process' from the international community.²¹ Despite China's official support for these initiatives, Chinese observers questioned whether concrete results for the foreseeable future would go beyond a new round of limited reductions between the United States and Russia.²² Moreover, many in China remained ambivalent about the effects that a bolstered nuclear arms-control and disarmament agenda could have on Chinese security.

To understand this ambivalence, it is important to highlight the nature of Chinese nuclear strategy and doctrine. Since it first tested nuclear weapons in 1964, China has sought to maintain a relatively small arsenal for 'assured retaliation'.²³ It has also maintained a no-first-use policy and has pledged to not engage in arms races. China provided the first official public-facing description of its nuclear strategy in its white paper on national defense in 2006, where it reiterated its no-first-use pledge and stated it sought to develop a 'lean and effective nuclear force'.²⁴ Due to the limited size of its arsenal and its potential vulnerability, China traditionally has relied on opacity about its capabilities to bolster deterrence.²⁵

²⁰Cole Harvey, 'Obama Calls for Nuclear Weapons-Free World.' *Arms Control Today* 39(4), (2009): pp. 29–30.

²¹Hu Jintao, 'Unite as One and Work for a Bright Future' (Statement at the General Debate of the 64th Session of the UN General Assembly, September 23, 2009), Accessed April 9, 2020. https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/64/64_CN_en.pdf.

²²Kong Guang and Yao Yunzhu, 'Wu He Wuqi Shijie' Yundong Pingxi' ['Analysis on the Campaign for a Nuclear-Weapons-Free World'], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (9), (2009), p. 80; Zhang Yeliang, 'Aobama Zhengfu de He Zhengce' ['The Obama Administration's Nuclear Policy'], *Meiguo Yanjiu* (2), (2010), pp. 23–26.

²³M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros, 'China's Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure,' *International Security*, 35(2), (2010): pp. 48–87.

²⁴State Council, '2006 Nian Zhongguo de Guofang' ['Chinese National Defense in 2006'], December 2006, Accessed April 9, 2020, http://www.mod.gov.cn/affair/2011-01/06/content_4249948.htm; in English: <http://en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2006/defense2006.html>.

²⁵Li Bin, 'China and Nuclear Transparency', in *Transparency in Nuclear Warheads and Materials: The Political and Technical Dimensions*, ed. Nicholas Zarimpas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 50–57.

Chinese analysts have argued that new arms-control initiatives could potentially serve its interest. Progress on US–Russian negotiations could alleviate international tensions, mitigate risks of a new nuclear arms race, and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the security strategy of the United States, developments that would also enhance Chinese security.²⁶ Observers in the Chinese military—many of whom were otherwise skeptical of US intentions—have also recognized potential benefits to China from arms control. For example, in the 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy (Zhanlüexue)*, the authors indicated that arms control may serve China’s interests by contributing to strategic stability, reducing the risk of nuclear war and limiting military spending.²⁷

While seeing some benefits, there was also widespread concern among many of the same analysts about the negative implications of Obama’s policies for China. With a growing global movement in support of disarmament, worries arose over increasing pressure on China and other medium-sized nuclear weapons states (NWS) to join multilateral disarmament.²⁸ Arms-control experts such as Fan Jishe highlighted that if the United Kingdom and France engaged in disarmament, China would then carry the stigma of being the only NWS not to implement its Article VI obligation under the NPT, which would damage China’s international reputation as a responsible and restrained NWS. As concerns about its military development increased, China’s ‘moral high ground’ on the nuclear issue vis a vis the US would thus be challenged.²⁹

Furthermore, many worried about increasing international calls for nuclear transparency. According to Sun Xiangli, a stronger arms-control and disarmament agenda—coupled with greater concerns of Chinese military capabilities—could lead to pressure for greater transparency from not only the United States, but also non-NWS, thus undermining Chinese strategic deterrence.³⁰ These concerns were in line with long-held Chinese reservations about calls for transparency about its capabilities.³¹ Furthermore, several prominent observers claimed US political domination and agenda-setting power led to an ‘unbalanced’ arms control agenda, and called for China to raise its voice, push back against US domination and attempt to ensure the arms-control agenda remained focused on the United States and Russia, the states with the largest arsenals.³²

Observers associated with the PLA were deeply skeptical of arms control in general with a particular concern over American intentions. The 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy* described arms control as a ‘struggle’ in which the great nuclear powers were attempting to protect their nuclear and strategic advantages, and where other states had to look after their own interests.³³ Several PLA officers attributed the US ‘nuclear hegemonic policies’ to be the primary source of global nuclear insecurity and the biggest obstacle to arms control.³⁴ They waved off Obama’s nuclear-weapons-free world as a superficial ‘slogan’ and ‘hollow talk’ as long as the United States maintained this hegemony.³⁵ In this regard, Obama’s nuclear-free world agenda was seen an attempt to unfairly

²⁶Fan Jishe, ‘Meiguo He Zhengce Tiaozheng yu Zhongguo de Zhengce Yingdui’ [‘America’s Nuclear Policy Adjustment and Implications for Chinese Policy’], *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* (2), (2010), pp. 78–79.

²⁷Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Zhanlüexue [The Science of Military Strategy]* (Beijing: Junshi Kexue Chubanshe, 2013), p. 176.

²⁸Xu Ruofei, ‘Lengzhan hou Meiguo He Liliang yu He Zhanlüe Fazhan Yanjiu’ [‘The Development of US Nuclear Forces and Nuclear Strategy after the Cold War’], *Waiguo Junshi Xueshu* (6), (2014), p. 45; Zhang ‘He Zhengce’, p. 20; Yao Youzhi, *Da Jiandao: Yingxiang Shijie de Zhanlüe Lilun [Great Sword: Strategic Theories that Influence the World]* (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 2014), p. 173.

²⁹Fan, ‘Meiguo He Zhengce’, p. 77. Other authors similarly point to US efforts arms control efforts as a way to prove its moral superiority and bolster its image. See Fei Xiaojun, ‘He Gui he chu? Dangqian Guoji He Junkong Xingshi Shuping’ [‘Where is “Nuclear” Going? Review of the Current State of International Nuclear Arms Control’], *Qishi* (13), (2009), p. 59.

³⁰Sun Xiangli, ‘Zhongguo Junkong de Xin Tiaozhan yu Xin Yicheng’ [‘New Challenges and New Agendas in Chinese Arms Control’], *Waijiao Pinglun* (3), (2010), p. 20; Fan, ‘Meiguo He Zhengce’, p. 76.

³¹Li, ‘China and Nuclear Transparency’.

³²Sun, ‘Zhongguo Junkong’, p. 20; see also Fan, ‘Meiguo He Zhengce’, p. 79.

³³Shou, ed., *Zhanlüexue*, p. 176.

³⁴Wang Zhongchun, ‘He Anquan Fenghui: Xunqiu Yingdui He Kongbu Zhuyi Weixie de Gongtong Xingdong’ [‘The Nuclear Security Summit: Seeking Joint Action to Counter the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism’], *Dangdai Shijie* (5), (2010), p. 33.

³⁵Yin Chengde, ‘Mei-E He Caijun Xin Tiaoyue yu “Wuhe Shijie” Shenhua’ [‘New US–Russian Disarmament Treaty and the Myth of a “Nuclear-Free World”’], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* (4), (2010), pp. 13; 17; see also Lu Yin, ‘Dongbei-Ya He Bu Kuosan Mianlin de Tiaozhan’ [‘Challenges for Nuclear Nonproliferation in Northeast Asia’], *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* (5), (2010), pp. 36–41.

and disproportionately limit medium NWS such as China compared to the US with its massive nuclear arsenal, all the while neglecting to regulate new technologies of key Chinese concern such as US missile defense and advanced conventional precision weapons. This would undermine the Chinese deterrent and render China's arsenal more vulnerable.³⁶

The skepticism towards US initiatives only grew stronger over time as Obama's disarmament initiatives made limited headway and the administration approved major investments in nuclear-weapons modernization. For example, PLA-associated researchers Dong Lu and Guo Gang argued that US investments in the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) were 'exposing the hypocrisy' of Obama, as the GBSD would expand the capabilities of the US nuclear arsenal and present a new threat to international security.³⁷ Similarly in 2016, PLA observers described the B61-12 nuclear bomb—a new variant under development as part of a life-extension program—as a 'classic first strike weapon' specifically tailored to circumvent existing regimes and that could potentially be used to strike Russian and Chinese ballistic missile silos.³⁸

In conclusion, although at least the first part of Obama's presidency was characterized by a change in international debates about disarmament, there is little evidence that these debates shifted the realpolitik paradigm of Chinese observers. Even if the degree of suspicion about US intentions and the tendency to see arms control as a zero-sum arena of conflict varied, most Chinese observers' views can be placed firmly under a realpolitik paradigm.

Chinese Views of Arms Control under Trump and Beyond

Recently, the skepticism about US arms-control policies have hardened further, with Chinese observers arguing that the US has returned to a policy of 'nuclear hegemony'.³⁹ More strongly than before, analysts associated with the PLA in particular—but also others—tend to regard US nuclear arms-control efforts as part of an effort to constrain Chinese capabilities, lock in an advantage and win a military competition.⁴⁰ Furthermore, US arms-control and disarmament initiatives are seen as part of a larger strategic toolkit whose purpose is to mobilize all military and diplomatic means to compete with China.⁴¹

The hardening of Chinese views stems primarily from two related shifts in US policy under Trump. First, through the NPR from 2018 and Missile Defense Review (MDR) from 2019, the United States signaled an intention to bolster its nuclear-weapons arsenal and missile defense infrastructure. For example, the United States is investing in new nuclear-weapon capabilities, most notably by reintroducing low-yield nuclear weapons on nuclear submarines. More broadly, and in alignment with the US National Security Strategy, the NPR and MDR explicitly identified China as a rival and potential threat.⁴² Second, during the same period, the nuclear arms-control agenda started to unravel. The United States and Russia formally withdrew from the INF treaty in August 2019, with US policymakers arguing that

³⁶Zhang, 'He Zhengce', p. 23; Yin, 'He Caijun', p. 17.

³⁷Dong Lu and Guo Gang, 'Meiguo Luji Zhanlüe Weishe Xitong Jishu Fazhan' ['Developments in the US Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent System'], in *Zhanlüe Weishe yu Daji Lingyu Keji Fazhan Baogao (2016 Nian)* [Developments in Strategic Deterrence and Strike Technology (2016)], ed. Pan Qilong (Beijing: Guofang Gongye Chubanshe, 2017), pp. 105–110.

³⁸Ge Aidong and Li Yi, 'Mei-E Xinxing He Daodan Fazhan Dongtai' ['The State of Development of New Nuclear Missiles in the US and Russia'], *Waiguo Junshi Xueshu* (4), (2016), p. 77.

³⁹Li Bin, 'Will US Nuclear Posture Review See a Return to Hegemony?' *Global Times*, January 24, 2018, Accessed April 9, 2020, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1086434.shtml>.

⁴⁰Tong Zhao, 'Opportunities for Nuclear Arms Control Engagement with China,' *Arms Control Today* (blog), January/February 2020, Accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/features/opportunities-nuclear-arms-control-engagement-china>.

⁴¹Luo Xi, 'Junkong Yiti zai Zhong-Mei Zhanlüe Duihua Qingdan shang Weizhi Qianyi' ['Arms Control is Moving up the Agenda of the Sino-US Strategic Dialogue'], *Shijie Zhishi* (9), (2019), p. 62; Luo Xi, 'Meiguo Kaiqi Tuichu "Zhongdao Tiaoyue" hou de "Liansuo Jincheng"' ['The Chain Reaction after the US Pulling out of the INF Treaty'], *Shijie Zhishi* (20), (2019), p. 54; Chu Fuhai, and Xiang Ganghua, 'Guoji He Junbei Kongzhi de Xianshi Kunjing yu Qianjing Chulu' ['Current Issues and Prospects in International Nuclear Arms Control'], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue* (4), (2018), pp 143–144.

⁴²US Department of Defense (US DOD), 'Nuclear Posture Review,' February 2018, Accessed 9 April 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>; US DOD, 'Missile defense review,' January 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/17/2002080666/-1/-1/1/2019-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.pdf>.

the lack of restrictions on China was a major reason for the treaty's demise. While New START was eventually extended after Biden took office in 2021, the future of the treaty long looked uncertain.

China's official reaction to these developments was highly critical. In a response to the NPR, the Chinese Ministry of Defense accused the United States of clinging to a 'Cold War mentality', adding that it hoped the United States would 'earnestly assume its special disarmament responsibilities, correctly understand China's strategic intentions and objectively view China's national defense and military build-up'.⁴³ As detailed in the next section, Chinese officials also were extremely critical of the US withdrawal from the INF and of the Trump administration's attitude towards New START, even if it welcomed the eventual extension of the latter treaty.

Chinese observers broadly agree that the United States is strengthening its pursuit of strategic superiority. Even if they recognize that there are other challenges facing the arms control agenda—such as the emergence of new technologies⁴⁴—they still see the US pursuit of superiority as a crucial impediment. Many further argue that this pursuit is directed against China. For example, PLA observers see the US reintroduction of low-yield nuclear weapons on submarines as evidence that the United States is lowering the threshold for nuclear use. They further claim that the United States is directing these weapons against China (not only Russia) and seek to develop low-yield options to address China's future conventional superiority in East Asia.⁴⁵

Broadly speaking, there are two interpretations of US policy in China. One group, which tends to be dominated by civilian arms-control experts, puts major emphasis on the Trump administration's shifts in nuclear policies. According to this group, the administration's explicit rejection of Obama-era initiatives and existing nuclear arms-control and disarmament initiatives have seriously harmed prospects for halting an arms race.⁴⁶ Claiming there has been a significant shift in US nuclear strategy, they criticize Trump's nuclear modernization effort as strengthening an already-superior US position.⁴⁷ Other observers—many of which are affiliated with the PLA—see a stronger continuity between the policies of Obama and Trump. According to these observers, the Trump administration's nuclear-development program inherited 'the hegemonic "soul" of US nuclear strategy', even if it bore the Trump trademark.⁴⁸ Thus, even if most Chinese analysts tend to see the world through

⁴³Guofangbu Xinwen Fayanren Ren Guoqiang Jiu Mei Gongbu "He Taishi Shenyi Baogao" Fabiao Tanhua' ['Statement by Ministry of Defense Spokesperson Ren Guoqiang on the Release of the US Nuclear Posture Review'], Ministry of Defense of China website, February 4, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2020. http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2018-02/04/content_4804130.htm.

⁴⁴See, for example, Li Mei, '2017 Nian Daodan He Wuqi Jishu Fazhan Zongshu' ['Overview of Developments in Missile and Nuclear-Weapons Technology in 2017'], in *Zhanlüe Weishe yu Daji Lingyu Keji Fazhan Baogao (2017 Nian)* [Developments in Strategic Deterrence and Strike Technology (2017)], ed. Pan Qilong (Beijing: Guofang Gongye Chubanshe, 2018), p. 20; Luo Xi, 'Rengong Zhineng Jishu Keneng Jiaju He Zhanzheng Fengxian' ['Artificial Intelligence Could Exacerbate the Risk of Nuclear War'], *Shijie Zhishi* (16), (2019), p. 69.

⁴⁵Author communication with Chinese arms control experts, Beijing, May 2019. See also Luo Xi, 'Meiguo Zhanlüe Weishe Tixi de Tiaozheng yu Zhong-Mei Zhanlüe Wendingxing' ['Shifts in US Strategic Deterrence and US-China Strategic Stability'], *Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu* (6), (2017), pp. 32–49; Fang Xiaozhi, 'Telangpu Zhengfu de Fangwu he He Zhengce Chongshi Lengzhan Siwei' ['The Trump Administration's Defense and Nuclear Policy Returns to Cold War Mindset'], *Shijie Zhishi* (6), (2018), pp. 39–43; Hu Dongdong, 'Meiguo Xinxing Kongshe He Xunhang Daodan Xiangmu Zhengyi ji Fazhan Zouxian Fenxi' ['Analysis of Disputes and Trends in the New US Air-Launched Nuclear Cruise Missile Program'], *Feihang Daodan* (4), (2019), p. 67.

⁴⁶Hu Gaochen, Fan Jishe, Guo Xiaobing, Han Hua, Jiang Yimin, Luo Xi, Wu Riqiang, Yao Yunzhu, Zhao Tong, and Li Bin, '2020 Nian Kainian de Guoji Junkong Xingshi yu Zhanwang' ['The State and Outlook of International Arms Control in 2020'], *Shijie Zhishi* (1), (2020), p. 73. See also Cui Jianshu, 'Telangpu Zhengfu Chongzheng He Junbei Dongyin Yanjiu' ['Motives of the Trump Administration's Restructuring of Nuclear Arms'], *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* (2), (2019), p. 144; Cai Huatang, *Meiguo Junshi Zhanlüe Yanjiu* [A Study of American Military Strategy]. (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 2019), p. 88.

⁴⁷Cui Jianshu, 'Meiguo He Liliang Xiandaihua yu Wangluo Kongjian Zhanlüe Wending' ['Modernization of US Nuclear Forces and Strategic Stability in Cyberspace'], *Zhongguo Xinxi Anquan* (8), (2019), p. 41; see also Luo, 'Meiguo Zhanlüe Weishe', p. 39.

⁴⁸Li Xianrong and Yang Min, 'Meiguo jiang jin Yibu Qianghua He Shizhan Nengli' ['The US will Further Enhance Nuclear-Warfighting Capability'], *Jiefangjun Bao*, March 1, 2018, Accessed August 10, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2018-03/01/content_200683.htm. On consolidation, see also Cai, *Meiguo Junshi Zhanlüe*, p. 221; Liu Yuan, Wang Xizhen, Xiang Zhigang, Li Yuqiang and Li Yanqin, '2016 Nian Zhanlüe Weishe yu Daji Lingyu Keji Fazhan Zongshu' ['Overview of Developments in Strategic Deterrence and Strike Technology in 2016'], in *Zhanlüe Weishe yu Daji Lingyu Keji Fazhan Baogao (2016 Nian)* [Developments in Strategic Deterrence and Strike Technology (2016)], ed. Pan Qilong (Beijing: Guofang Gongye Chubanshe, 2017), pp. 3–18), p. 3; Zhang Li and Sun Xiaofei, '2017 Nian He Keji Gongye Fazhan Zongshu' ['Overview of Developments in Nuclear Technology and Industry in 2017'], in *Zhanlüe Weishe yu Daji Lingyu Keji Fazhan Baogao (2017 Nian)* [Developments in Strategic Deterrence and Strike Technology (2017)], ed. Pan Qilong (Beijing: Guofang Gongye Chubanshe, 2018), p. 50.

realpolitik lenses, these lenses come in different shades. While the former group might be more pragmatic, the latter is likely to be extremely skeptical of any US initiatives.

Perspectives on Major International Treaties and the Future of Arms Control

Chinese observers are pessimistic about the future of nuclear arms control. Recently, three issues have been the object of debate: the demise of the INF treaty, the fate of New START and the need to control advanced non-nuclear technologies that may affect strategic stability.

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

The demise of the INF treaty in 2019 was perceived very negatively in China. Hardly any Chinese observers believe the treaty can be revived. The INF treaty had been a cornerstone of the international arms-control infrastructure since its ratification by the United States and the Soviet Union in December 1987. It restricted both sides from developing or deploying ground-launched ballistic or cruise missiles with ranges of 500 km to 5,500 km (regardless of whether they were armed with nuclear or conventional warheads). In recent years, the United States began alleging Russian treaty violations over a new cruise missile, to which Russia responded with allegations against the United States.⁴⁹ The United States also complained that the treaty did not restrain China, which has deployed more than 2,000 ground-based missiles which would have otherwise been banned by the INF—the vast majority of which are armed with conventional warheads.⁵⁰

The INF's demise did not come unexpectedly to Chinese observers, who had previously expressed doubts whether the treaty would survive the downturn in US–Russian relations.⁵¹ Chinese arms-control experts also claimed the United States long had attempted to circumvent INF restrictions by developing long-range conventional precision-strike weapons.⁵² In a commentary in the *PLA Daily*, Ling Shengli from China Foreign Affairs University argued that the US withdrawal was 'entirely logical' (shunli chengzhang) because the United States adheres only to treaties that serve its interests and abandons those that do not.⁵³

Although expected, the US pullout brought China's strong condemnation.⁵⁴ Chinese officials were particularly unhappy that the United States pointed to the Chinese missile arsenal as a reason for its withdrawal. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Arms Control Director Fu Cong, China not being bound by the treaty and the allegations of Russian cheating were 'pure pretexts' whose real purpose were 'to free [the US] hand and develop its missile capabilities'.⁵⁵ He further criticized the US announcement expressing intent to deploy new ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles in East Asia, warning that China would not sit idly by and issuing thinly veiled warnings to US allies not to host missiles.⁵⁶ Chinese officials repeatedly rejected calls by the United States, Japan, and Germany to join negotiations about a multilateral INF.⁵⁷

⁴⁹Maggie Tennis, 'INF Dispute Adds to U.S.–Russia Tensions,' *Arms Control Today* 47(5), (2017): pp. 29–30.

⁵⁰Andrew Roth, 'US Confirms Withdrawal from Nuclear Arms Treaty with Russia,' *Guardian*, October 23, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/23/bolton-inf-treaty-russia-putin-moscow-meeting>.

⁵¹Li, '2017 Nian Daodan He Wuqi', p. 20.

⁵²Zhou Wei, Gao Cheng, and Jin Xuehai, 'Zhanlüe Daodan yu He Wuqi' [Strategic Missiles and Nuclear Weapons], in Yu Haikuan (ed.), *Shijie Junshi Nianjian 2015 Nian* [World Military Yearbook 2015], (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 2015), p. 577.

⁵³Ling Shengli, 'Meiguo Weihe Zhiyi Tuichu 'Zhongdao Tiaoyue' ['Why the US Insists on Withdrawing from the INF Treaty'], *Jiefangjun Bao*, November 1, 2018, p. 11.

⁵⁴Waijiaobu Jiu Junkong yu Fang Kuosan Wenti Juxing Zhongwai Meiti Chuifenghui' ['MFA Holds Briefing to Chinese and Foreign Media on Arms-Control and Nonproliferation Issues'], *Xinhua News Agency*, August 6, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-08/06/c_1124844566.htm.

⁵⁵Briefing by Mr. Fu Cong, Director General of the Department of Arms Control and Disarmament of MFA', MFA of China website, August 6, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1686559.shtml.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷'China Reiterates Opposition to Multilateralization of INF Treaty', *Xinhua News Agency*, July 30, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/30/c_138270534.htm.

How much potential US deployments of new ground-launched missiles in East Asia will affect its security is a matter of debate in China. To be sure, Chinese analysts recognize that it will take years before the United States deploys new ballistic missiles, and that US allies appear reluctant to host them. At the same time, Chinese analysts express concern that the US will try to win the allies over.⁵⁸ Furthermore, there is debate about how forward-deployed missiles would affect China's nuclear arsenal. Arms-control expert Wu Riqiang claimed that even if American missiles were deployed outside Guam, conventionally armed missiles would represent only a limited threat, and that nuclear-armed missiles will have close to zero effect on strategic stability.⁵⁹ Most other analysts, however, are less sanguine, claiming US missiles could alter the military balance and constitute an unacceptable counterforce threat against China's nuclear arsenal. In the worst case, they argue that this could spur an 'Asian Cuban Missile Crisis.'⁶⁰ Regardless of military consequences, there is broad agreement that deploying new missiles—particularly nuclear-armed ones—would produce a major political fallout and be seen as a sign of aggressive nuclear posturing.⁶¹ Deployments would underscore further that the United States is attempting to contain and encircle China.⁶² Some Chinese analysts also argue that the true motive behind the US withdrawal from the INF is its attempt to force China into a costly arms race.⁶³

Chinese observers highlight why it is not even remotely possible that the country would join the INF in anything resembling its current form. Like their international counterparts, they point out that the United States has an array of sea- and air-launched missiles that the INF does not cover, and that China's geography makes it more reliant on ground-launched missiles that fall within the INF restrictions than the United States is. China could lose approximately 95% of its missile forces if it were to adhere to the INF—whereas the United States only would have to refrain from deploying new platforms—thus joining the INF would put China at a major military disadvantage.⁶⁴

New START and Future Arms Control Negotiations

The discussions about extension of the New START treaty also raised deep skepticism in Beijing. The treaty, which entered into force in 2011, limits the United States and Russia to 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads, and was set to expire in February 2021. While they later softened their stance, Trump administration officials originally demanded talks about extending New START should be replaced with trilateral negotiations involving China.⁶⁵ The Biden administration supported extension of New START, but Secretary of State Antony Blinken promised to 'pursue arms control to reduce the dangers from China's modern and growing nuclear arsenal'.⁶⁶

⁵⁸Zhao Weibin, 'Potential Impact of US Deployment of Intermediate-Range Missiles in Asia, August 23, 2019, Accessed September 29, 2020. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/potential-impact-of-us-deployment-of-intermediate-range-missiles-in-asia>.

⁵⁹Wu Riqiang, 'Zhongguo Buying Jiaru Zhongdao Tiaoyue de Liyou' ['The Reasons Why China Will Not Join the INF Treaty'], *Huanqiu Shibao*, November 7, 2018, Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrNkewMm>.

⁶⁰Guo Xiaobing (2019), 'Meiguo Tuichu "Zhongdao Tiaoyue" de Dongyin yu Yingxiang Qianxi' [Analysis of Drivers and Implications of the US Withdrawal from the INF Treaty], *Zhongguo Guoji Zhanlüe Pinglun* (1), p. 202; see also Tong Zhao, 'Why China Is Worried about the End of the INF Treaty,' *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy* blog, November 7, 2018, Accessed April 9, 2020, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2018/11/07/why-china-is-worried-about-end-of-inf-treaty-pub-77669>; Ji Zhiye, 'Zhong-E Buxie Nuli, Weihu Quanqiu Zhanlüe Wendong' ['China and Russia Make Ceaseless Efforts to Protect Global Strategic Stability'], *Huanqiu Shibao*, June 6, 2019, p. 14.

⁶¹Wu Riqiang, 'China's Calculus after the INF Treaty,' *East Asia Forum*, May 8, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020. <https://www.eastasforum.org/2019/05/08/chinas-calculus-after-the-inf-treaty/>.

⁶²Zhao, 'Why China Is Worried'.

⁶³Luo, 'Meiguo Kaiqi Tuichu', p. 52.

⁶⁴Wu, 'China's Calculus'; Shen Dingli, 'Meiguo La Zhongguo He Caijun, Gai Ruhe Yingdui' ['The US Is Pulling China into Nuclear Disarmament, How Should We Respond'], *Huanqiu Shibao*, May 6, 2019, accessed May 10, 2020. <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrNkKh7j>.

⁶⁵Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, 'US Modifies Arms Control with Russia', *Arms Control Today*, September (2020), Accessed September 30, 2020. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-09/news/us-modifies-arms-control-aims-russia>.

⁶⁶Blinken, 'On the Extension of the New START Treaty with the Russian Federation'.

Chinese officials on several occasions rejected the Trump administration's calls for participating in trilateral talks. They pointed to the gap in nuclear capabilities, and further argued that China is taking part in many other nuclear-disarmament efforts, such as discussions in the Conference on Disarmament.⁶⁷ While China welcomed the decision to extend New START, Chinese MFA spokesperson Wang Wenbin responded to Blinken's comments about China by stating that 'We firmly reject the groundless allegation and vilification from the U.S. side'.⁶⁸

Chinese arms-control experts used harsh terms about the Trump administration's calls for trilateral negotiations, describing them as 'nonsense', and 'coming out of nowhere' (wuzhong shengyou).⁶⁹ Many suspected the United States was seeking to abandon disarmament altogether and trying to blame the collapse of the New START on China. Moreover, analysts further highlighted that while calling on China to join negotiations, the United States did not raise specific suggestions for including China.⁷⁰ When New START was eventually extended, Chinese observers continued to express misgivings about the intentions of the United States, seeing it as driven by a desire to limit the Russian arsenal, and not by any real concern about arms control and disarmament. They further warned about further US attempt to place limits on 'other states' to maintain its superiority.⁷¹

To be sure, Chinese observers recognize that having talks with the United States (albeit not necessarily leading to any agreements or treaties) could have positive effects. Through communication, it may be possible to dampen the emerging arms race trend and strengthen strategic stability.⁷² Moreover, as China's economic and military power continues to grow, observers recognize that attention towards its arsenal also will increase, making it harder to avoid discussions and exchanges.⁷³ While recognizing that it would be unlikely to be receive support from Chinese policymakers, some have even argued that joining trilateral negotiations could be an occasion to showcase that China has a much more restrained nuclear posture than do the United States or Russia.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, most Chinese observers are very skeptical about joining arms control talks, believing the United States would use negotiations to attempt to impose one-sided restrictions on China's nuclear development.⁷⁵ They further fear the United States would utilize negotiations to gain greater insight into China's military forces.⁷⁶

Advanced Non-nuclear Technologies

Chinese officials have argued that key non-nuclear technologies need to be part of the nuclear arms-control agenda. In particular, they argue that lack of restrictions on missile defense strongly impedes arms-control efforts.⁷⁷ In addition, China has expressed concern that the weaponization of space

⁶⁷Briefing by Mr. Fu Cong'.

⁶⁸'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on February 5, 2021'.

⁶⁹Yang Chengjun, 'Yang Chengjun: Guoji He Xingshi Jiju Dongdang—Zhongguo Geng Ying Jingxi Laizi Meiguo He Weixie' ['Yang Chengjun: Turmoil in the International Nuclear Situation; China Should Be More Wary of the US Nuclear Threat'], *Huanqiu Shibao*, December 27, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020, <https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/3wN3gqxGk7i>; Cui, 'Telangpu Zhengfu, p. 147; see also Fan Jishe, 'Zhongguo He Zhengce de Jiben Luoji yu Qianjing' ['The Logic and Evolution of China's Nuclear Policy'], *Waijiao Pinglun* (5), (2018), p. 19.

⁷⁰Tong Zhao, 'Opportunities for Nuclear Arms Control Engagement with China', *Arms Control Today*, (January/February 2020), Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/features/opportunities-nuclear-arms-control-engagement-china>.

⁷¹Fang Xiaozhi, 'E-Mei Xu Yue Yi, Guanxi Haozhuan Nan' [Russian-US Treaty Extension Easy, Improving Relations Difficult], *Jiefangjun Bao*, February 4, 2021, p.4.

⁷²Luo, 'Junkong Yiti', p. 63.

⁷³Fan, 'Zhongguo He Zhengce', p. 20.

⁷⁴George Perkovich, 'What's in it for China? A Beijing Insider's Surprising Insight on Nuclear Arms Control', *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy* blog, July 30, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/30/what-s-in-it-for-china-beijing-insider-s-surprising-insight-on-nuclear-arms-control-pub-79596>.

⁷⁵Lu Xiao & Zeng Huaifeng, 'Quanqiu He Wuqi Anquan Xianzhuang ji Weilai Zouxiang' [Current State and Future Trends of Global Nuclear Weapons Security], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue* (5), (2018), p. 89; Zhao, 'Opportunities for Nuclear Arms Control'.

⁷⁶Luo, 'Junkong Yiti', p. 62.

⁷⁷See, for example, MFA of China Department of Policy Planning, *Zhongguo Waijiao 2013 Nian [China's Foreign Affairs in 2013]* (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2014), p. 271.

may affect strategic stability and has called for negotiating a treaty on 'Preventing an Arms Race in Outer Space'.

A joint article by some of China's leading arms controllers describe the lack of control on advanced conventional technologies as the most critical shortfall of the current arms-control infrastructure. They describe missile defense, space-based and counter-space weapons, hypersonic glide vehicles, US Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS), cyber capabilities and autonomous platforms as technologies and capabilities of concern.⁷⁸ The problem with many of these technologies, they argue, is the first-mover advantage: The state that first develops and deploys the technologies might achieve a significant military advantage, which could catalyze an arms race.⁷⁹ In addition to racing to develop such technologies, less technologically advanced states may have to strengthen their nuclear arsenals to ensure a survivable deterrent.⁸⁰

Chinese observers are not optimistic about the prospects for arms control involving these technologies. They regard the US objections and desire to maintain its superiority as the biggest obstacle to international restrictions. Further, they highlight how the United States has increased the pace of advanced conventional-capabilities development and increasingly rely on such systems for strategic deterrence.⁸¹

US missile defense is the capability Chinese strategists see as the greatest challenge by far. According to Chinese observers, US missile defense systems not only force opponents to ensure a certain size and sophistication in their nuclear arsenals, but they also draw strategic mistrust and suspicion from Russia and China, exacerbating tensions and undermining strategic stability.⁸² Although China recognizes that US missile defense efforts face numerous challenges, the concern is that the technology could mature in the future.⁸³ For this reason, Chinese observers advocate treating strategic nuclear weapons and missile defense simultaneously.⁸⁴ In addition, there is broad concern over US CPGS, because it may constitute a counterforce threat against China's arsenal.⁸⁵

Can China Raise Its Voice?

Chinese officials have recently started to introduce new language into its official rhetoric on arms control. The MFA Yearbook of Diplomacy for 2017 stated that China is 'raising its voice' and 'proposing Chinese solutions' to arms-control issues, a formulation it had not used in earlier editions.⁸⁶ Similarly, Ambassador Wang Qun, MFA Director-General of the Arms Control Department, argued that China 'actively offers Chinese wisdom' to international security governance.⁸⁷

⁷⁸Hu Gaochen et al., 'Guoji Junkong'.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰See, for example, Zhang Yan, *Zhanlüe Weishe Lun [Theory on Strategic Deterrence]* (Beijing: Shehui Keuxue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2018), p. 224.

⁸¹Lü Binbin, 'Meijun Changgui Quanqiu Kuaisu Daji Xitong Jishu Jinzhan' ['Progress in US Conventional Prompt Global Strike Technology'], in *Zhanlüe Weishe yu Daji Lingyu Keji Fazhan Baogao (2016 Nian) [Developments in Strategic Deterrence and Strike Technology (2016)]*, ed. Pan Qilong (Beijing: Guofang Gongye Chubanshe, 2017), p. 91; Yu Haikuan (ed.), *Shijie Junshi Nianjian 2014 Nian [World Military Yearbook 2014]* (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 2016) p. 466; see also Zhang, *Zhanlüe Weishe Lun*, p. 226.

⁸²Wang Xin and Chen Yue, 'Mei-Han Tuidong "Sade" ru Han de Dongyin Fenxi ji dui Diqiu Zhanlüe Geju de Yingxiang' ['Analysis of Drivers in the US and Korea Deploying THAAD to Korea, and its Impact on the Regional Strategic Situation'], *Waiguo Junshi Xueshu* (10), (2016), p. 34; Luo, 'Meiguo Zhanlüe Weishe Tixi', p. 36; Sun, 'Zhongguo Junkong', p. 14.

⁸³For an analysis of such challenges, see Jia Zhanyang, 'Meiguo Daodan Fangyu Xianjin Jishu Jiqi Fazhan Silu Fenxi' [Analysis of US Advanced Missile Defense Technology and its Development Philosophy], in Wu Qin (ed.), *Xianjin Fangyu Lingyu Keji Fazhan Baogao (2016 Nian) [Developments in Advanced Defense Technology, 2016 Edition]*, (Beijing: Guofang Gongye Chubanshe, 2017), pp. 72–73.

⁸⁴Wu Riqiang, 'Trilateral Arms Control Initiative: A Chinese Perspective,' *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* blog, September 4, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/09/trilateral-arms-control-initiative-a-chinese-perspective/>.

⁸⁵See, for example, Zhang Yan, *Zhanlüe Weishe Lun*, p. 224. For a thorough analysis of Chinese perspectives on CPGS, see also Cunningham and Fravel, 'Assuring Assured Retaliation'.

⁸⁶MFA of China Department of Policy Planning, *Zhongguo Waijiao 2017 Nian [China's Foreign Affairs in 2017]* (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2018), p. 280.

⁸⁷Statement by Ambassador Wang Qun, Director-General of the Arms Control Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, at the General Debate of the First Committee of the 71st Session of the UNGA, October 10, 2016, Accessed August 10, 2020. <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/10-Oct-China.pdf>.

Both the talk of ‘raising China’s voice’ and ‘offering Chinese wisdom’ reflect broader calls from Xi Jinping to ‘tell China’s story well’ and ‘spread China’s voice’ and thus increase China’s narrative power.⁸⁸ Moreover, they reflect China’s efforts to shape global governance more actively. At a rally marking the Chinese Communist Party’s 95th anniversary, President Xi Jinping stated that China should ‘strive to contribute Chinese wisdom to the improvement of global governance’.⁸⁹ The catchphrase also was used in Xi’s report at the 19th Party Congress and subsequently repeated by officials.⁹⁰ Although the phrase’s exact implications are unclear, it indicates a Chinese push to exert more influence on international institutions.⁹¹

Chinese arms-control experts and observers also referred to ‘Chinese wisdom’ and ‘Chinese initiatives’ more frequently after 2017.⁹² Although this may signal little more than ritual repetition of an official catchphrase, some have indicated that the world may be more receptive to Chinese policies now than in the past. As the Trump administration pulled out of major arms-control arrangements, the US domination of the arms control agenda seemed less entrenched, with some Chinese observers arguing that the United States had ‘thrown away the cover of morality’ that characterized the Obama administration.⁹³

Despite calls for contributing Chinese wisdom, Chinese officials have not offered any major new suggestions for the arms-control agenda. China continues to call for all NWS to adopt a no-first-use policy and reaffirm the Gorbachev-Reagan statement that ‘a nuclear war can never be won and should never be fought’.⁹⁴ In addition, China points to the importance of protecting existing international regimes, such as the NPT and the CTBT, strengthening dialogue between NWS and non-NWS, and regulating new technologies such as space-based weapons, cyberweapons, and autonomous systems.⁹⁵

However, even if these suggestions are not new, China has presented them as a contrast to US policies and is seeking to portray itself as a more responsible nuclear power than the United States. For example, Chinese officials have pointed to the importance of protecting the CTBT, which they have argued is ‘endangered by some of the US moves’.⁹⁶ They have further pointed to the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty and statements that it would ‘unsign’ the Arms Trade Treaty (which China recently acceded to), arguing that it adds to ‘a long list of international treaties that the US has withdrawn from’.⁹⁷ Thus, China has portrayed itself as a status-quo-oriented actor protecting the existing nuclear order against a US onslaught. This narrative—wherein the United States is cast as the revisionist—sits well with the larger story China has sought to tell

⁸⁸Xi Jinping, ‘Xionghuai Daju Bawo Dashi Zhuoyan Dashi Nuli ba Xuanchuan Sixiang Gongzuo Zuo de Geng Hao’ [Keep the Present Conditions in Mind, Grasp the General Trends, Focus on Major Events, and Strive to Improve Propaganda and Ideological Work], *People’s Daily*, August 21, 2013, Accessed September 28, 2020, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0821/c64094-22636876.html>.

⁸⁹Xi Jinping zai Qingzhu Zhongguo Gongchandang Chengli 95 zhou Nian Dahui shang de Jianghua’ [‘Xi Jinping’s Speech at the Meeting for Commemorating the 95th Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese Communist Party’], Chinese Communist Party (CCP) news website, July 1, 2016, Accessed May 12, 2020, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0702/c64093-28517655.html>.

⁹⁰Xi Jinping, ‘Juesheng Quanmian Jiancheng Xiaokang Shehui—Duoqu Xin Shidai Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Weida Shengli’ [‘Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’] (Work Report at the 19th National Congress of the CCP, October 18, 2017). Full text available at <http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/29613458>, Accessed May 12, 2020.

⁹¹On the phrase, see Nadège Rolland, ‘China’s Vision for a New World Order’, *NBR Special Report* 83, (2020), p. 52.

⁹²See e.g. Lu and Zeng, ‘Quanqiu He Wuqi’, pp. 95, and Luo, ‘Meiguo Kaiqi Tuichu’, p. 54.

⁹³Lu and Zeng, ‘Quanqiu He Wuqi’, p. 88.

⁹⁴‘Waijiaobu Junkongsi Sizhang Fu Cong zai Mosike Fangkuosan Dahui shang Guanyu “Junkong Fangkuosan Jizhi Weilai” de Zhuanti Fayan’ [MFA Arms Control Office Director-General Fu Cong’s Keynote Speech at the Moscow Nonproliferation Conference Regarding ‘The Future of Arms Control and Disarmament Mechanisms’], MFA of China website, November 8, 2019, Accessed April 9, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/t1714412.shtml.

⁹⁵Fu Cong, ‘Weihe Quanqiu Zhanlüe Wending, Jianshao He Chongtu Fenxian’ [‘Protect Global Strategic Stability, Reduce the Risk of Nuclear Conflict’] (Speech at the 16th Beijing Arms Control Seminar, October 16, 2019), Accessed May 12, 2020. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/t1708323.shtml.

⁹⁶Briefing by Mr. Fu Cong’.

⁹⁷China MFA, ‘Department of Arms Control and Disarmament Holds Briefing for International Arms Control and Disarmament Issues’, July 8, 2020, Accessed September 30, 2020. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1795979.shtml.

about its rise.⁹⁸ Moreover, the narrative aligns well with long-standing efforts to bolster its image and contest US domination of the arms control agenda.

Of course, if US policies shift towards greater support of arms-control efforts under the Biden administration, it will be harder for China to cast the United States as the revisionist, and concerns about US domination of the agenda may intensify. Indeed, some Chinese observers claim a key reason the Biden administration supported extension of New START was to rebuild credibility among its allies and in the international community more broadly.⁹⁹ Thus, even if US policies shift, it is likely that many in China will regard US initiatives as part of a broader political struggle over image, and not as serious attempt to bolster stability and arms control.

Conclusion

Chinese assessments reveal a significant, increasing skepticism of nuclear arms-control efforts and strong suspicion of US intentions. Even during the Obama era, many Chinese observers doubted whether the United States had abandoned its 'hegemonist' nuclear policy and believed the United States primarily sought to bolster its military advantage. In recent years, as US nuclear policy shifted, Chinese suspicions concurrently hardened. There is a strong tendency to see arms-control initiatives as a trap—designed by the United States to either blame China for the demise of arms control or lock in its nuclear superiority.

Chinese observers diverge in views on several issues. Most notably, some saw the shifts in US policy between Obama and Trump as dramatic, whereas others regarded the Trump administration's nuclear policies as little more than confirmation of the United States' continued search for 'hegemony'. Nevertheless, a clear majority of observers operate within a *realpolitik* paradigm. Some may adhere to a harder *realpolitik* view than others, viewing arms control almost exclusively through the lenses of conflict and struggle. However, moderate voices also display ambivalence about arms-control measures and strong skepticism of the United States.

This article's findings underscore the strong continuity in Chinese strategists' views of arms control. Even if there was a partial rethink during the late-1990s and early-2000s, the basic *realpolitik* paradigm remained intact. Even during the Obama administration's first years—when US–China tensions were relatively limited and the climate for nuclear arms control was improving—skepticism of arms control in general, and of US intentions in particular, ran strong. In recent years, the *realpolitik* attitude of many Chinese observers has only hardened further.

The tendency to view arms control as an arena of struggle and competition illustrates a broader tendency in China to see relations with the United States in zero-sum terms, and to believe that policymakers in Washington harbor hostile intentions. Scobell and Nathan have argued that China commonly views the United States as seeking to 'curtail Chinese political influence and harm China's interests'.¹⁰⁰ Other scholars have made similar observations in specific policy areas, such as with US alliances.¹⁰¹

The strong suspicions of US intentions make it difficult to be sanguine about prospects for Chinese involvement in arms control. Of course, one may argue that Chinese strategists' skepticism of US policies are well-founded, and that the most important impediment is not lack of trust, but a lack of interest. Given the large size discrepancy between the Chinese and US (as well as Russian) arsenals, and arguably a failure by the United States to present concrete alternatives that would suit China's security interests, it is not surprising that China has rejected calls by the United States. For example, the refusal by the United States so far to consider limits on missile defense—China's most serious concern—certainly does not improve the

⁹⁸See, for example, Wang Jiangyu 'US the Real Revisionist Power', *China Daily*, June 17, 2019, Accessed May 12, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/global/2019-06/17/content_37481345.htm.

⁹⁹Fang, 'E-Mei Xu Yue Yi, Guanxi Haozhuan Nan'.

¹⁰⁰Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, 'How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing's Fears', *Foreign Affairs* 91, (2012), p. 33.

¹⁰¹Liff, 'China and US Alliance System'.

prospects for engaging China.¹⁰² Nevertheless, with suspicions of the United States running high, convincing China to even join talks—much less to reach any agreement—is likely to be a daunting challenge.

If present trends continue, international nuclear arms-control might not just be characterized by deadlock, but also increasingly turn into an arena where the rivalry between the United States and China plays out. China appears to have intensified its efforts to push back against perceived US domination of this agenda. Like in other arenas, Chinese and US narratives about nuclear policy are on a collision course—and the struggle to win international support for their respective narratives is intensifying.

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¹⁰²The 2019 MDR states that 'the United States will not accept any limitation or constraint on the development or deployment of missile defense capabilities needed to protect the homeland against rogue *missile* threats'. US DOD, 'Missile Defense Review' p. VII.