

Fall 2024 - Marcellus Policy Analysis

## **New Nuclear Age, New Nuclear Problems: How the United States Can Engage China Through Behavioral Arms Control**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The collapse of Cold War-era arms control regimes and the rise of new technologies demand a fresh approach to arms control between the United States and China. Historically, bilateral agreements with the Soviet Union and later Russia have shaped U.S. arms control efforts. However, China's changing approach to nuclear security, resistance to participating in traditional arms control regimes, and cold relations with the United States require a new strategy. Despite mistrust and diverging security interests, both nations have a shared interest in managing competition to reduce instability and prevent a costly arms race. The U.S. government needs a new strategy to engage China in arms control efforts. Behavioral Arms Control (BAC) presents a possible solution. BAC emphasizes informality, responsibility, and multidimensionality to facilitate informal and flexible arms control engagement. This policy paper identifies how adopting a BAC framework using unilateral declarations, engaging through multilateral declarations and fora, and enhancing coordination with U.S. allies can promote arms control initiatives with China.

Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) stand out as a viable means to unilaterally engage China in arms control. PNIs are informal, executive-led actions that do not require Congressional approval. New PNIs could target specific areas of Sino-American concern, such as ensuring human oversight over AI in nuclear decision-

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making, limiting missile deployments, or prohibiting anti-satellite weapon tests. These measures would demonstrate U.S. intent to promote restraint and invite reciprocal action from China. This framework enables the United States to maintain strategic flexibility should China fail to respond because of the speed and scope of implementation. Moreover, leveraging multilateral forums, like the P5 which comprises the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, or international initiatives that focus on promoting nuclear restraint and disarmament could further constructive dialogue. These platforms could build consensus among nuclear powers, address challenges posed by new technologies, and foster transparency in arms control practices. Multilateral engagement provides an opportunity to integrate China into broader international disarmament efforts, facilitating technical and policy dialogue on emerging nuclear and non-nuclear threats. Finally, U.S.-allied coordination yields another means for informal engagement. The United States must work closely with East Asian allies, such as Japan and South Korea, to regulate the use of Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons (SNNWs) and clarify conditions for their deployment to allay Chinese concerns regarding SNNW deployment in East Asia. The United States should focus on means to further develop U.S.-allied coordination in the event of a crisis and improve mechanisms to communicate with allies to prevent miscalculation. These developments can reassure China of U.S.-allied intentions to limit miscalculation and escalation during crises.

While these informal approaches are not substitutes for formal, binding agreements, they serve as short-term measures to address immediate risks. Informal mechanisms can build trust, assist in managing great power competition, and pave the way for future formal agreements. Without proactive engagement, the United States risks an arms race with China that could erode its relative power, inflate economic spending, and diminish American security. These policy suggestions highlight the need for novel and flexible arms control measures. Informal arms control engagement can mitigate the worst aspects of Sino-American competition while laying the foundations for the long-term goal of comprehensive and formal arms control agreements.

## **Traditional Arms Control is Dead**

Traditional approaches to arms control are dead. Since the end of the Cold War, the arms control frameworks and agreements created by the United States and Soviet Union have gradually eroded in strength. As of 2024, almost all meaningful arms control frameworks and agreements are suspended, nullified, or dysfunctional. The New START Treaty, the centerpiece of the post-Cold War arms control framework and the last nuclear arms control pact between the United States and Russia, will expire in 2026 with almost no chance of renewal. Despite statements from the White House announcing a “willingness to engage in bilateral arms control discussions with Russia... without preconditions,”<sup>1</sup> subsequent responses from Russia have noted “[Russia does] not see any reason not only for taking additional joint measures on arms control or reducing strategic risks, but also for engaging in strategic stability talks with the U.S. in general”<sup>2</sup> for as long as the U.S. government continues to militarily support Ukraine.

Although the U.S.-Russian relationship endured a period without nuclear arms control at the beginning of the Cold War, this period culminated in a near nuclear crisis in 1962 that led to the subsequent creation of the Cold War-era arms control regime. Because Russo-American relations are at their lowest point since 1962, revitalizing these arms control regimes seems infeasible. Moreover, the collapse of these Cold War-era arms control regimes coincides with new political and technological developments that make arms control more complex while the risk of escalation grows. Finally, this ongoing collapse coincides with the military and political rise of China as a new great power competitor for the United States.

The emergence of a trilateral global distribution of power and looming tensions in East Asia surrounding the Korean peninsula, South China Sea, and Taiwan will create new security challenges for the U.S. military as time goes on. The United States should take proactive measures to maximize existing leverage to secure American interests before those goals become more challenging to achieve. The United States must utilize a new approach to engage China regarding arms control in East Asia. During a NATO summit this July, the alliance warned of Chinese expansion and diversification of existing nuclear arsenals, projecting Chinese possession of as many as 1000 nuclear weapons by 2030.<sup>3</sup> This expansion coincides with a one trillion-dollar American initiative

to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Because of these two ongoing actions, the U.S. and China's nuclear and conventional forces have become intertwined for both states' security posturing. Absent efforts to reignite arms control dialogue between the United States and China, both states will engage in a destabilizing and costly nuclear arms race.

Additionally, even if the United States and China somehow agreed to a comprehensive arms control agreement, uncertainty exists whether the United States would remain able to uphold the deal. Growing political polarization in the American Congress has diminished the policymaking process to shield arms control agreements from partisan dispute and reversal.<sup>4</sup> Partisanship toward arms control deals is most recently exemplified in the first Trump administration. During this administration, Republicans targeted the Iran nuclear deal, left the Arms Trade Treaty, withdrew from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and exited the Treaty on Open Skies - all votes related to these treaties were conducted along partisan lines.<sup>5</sup> The first Trump administration is not an exception. Since the start of the 21st century, arms control has become increasingly politicized in America.<sup>6</sup> Cold War-era arms control bipartisanship is gone and will likely not return quickly enough. The inability of the United States to ensure a sustainable bipartisan interest in arms control will likely further weaken the already eroding international arms control regime.

The need for new approaches to engage China on arms control also comes as Lin Jian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, announced the cancellation of Sino-American arms control talks while describing "the political atmosphere for continuing the arms control consultations" as "seriously compromised."<sup>7</sup> A failure to adapt American foreign policy to engage with China on the topic of arms control will heighten the risk of military conflict in East Asia and bring the United States into a costly arms race.

## **The New Nuclear Age and Strategic**

### **Non-Nuclear Weapons (SNNWs)**

The transition from a bipolar to tripolar order with the rise of China and the emergence of new technology has led to the development of a "new nuclear age"<sup>8</sup>

or "third nuclear age."<sup>9</sup> Concurrent with China's rise, the development of new disruptive technology in the field of AI and the growing effectiveness of other Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons (SNNWs), has created new pathways for nuclear escalation.<sup>10</sup> AI threatens to lower the threshold for nuclear escalation by enhancing the effectiveness of escalatory cyber attacks and generating uncertainty for human control over nuclear weapons systems. Simultaneously, non-cyber SNNWs, such as anti-ballistic missile systems, anti-satellite weaponry, and advanced non-nuclear weapons systems, threaten to erode traditional nuclear deterrence by reducing nuclear weapon survivability and effectiveness. These trends will continue to encourage nuclear weapon modernization and buildup between nuclear powers.

The development of new SNNWs, particularly by the United States, is actively encouraging Chinese nuclear weapons expansion. As early as 2006, Chinese arms control expert, Li Bin, noted, "Theoretically, the U.S. national missile defense system can eliminate China's nuclear retaliation capability and turn China into a de facto non-nuclear country... Missile defense may become a new source of coercion [against China] for the U.S."<sup>11</sup> One Chinese scholar has gone as far as to assert U.S. missile defense systems could eliminate China's second strike capability.<sup>12</sup> Chinese policy makers view the rapid American development in anti-ballistic missile systems, cyberwarfare, electronic warfare, and in other SNNW areas as undermining China's nuclear deterrence. Concerns regarding the balance between nuclear and conventional non-nuclear are not new.<sup>13</sup> However, the speed of development and perception of risks to the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence drive strategic instability. New technology capable of undermining the effectiveness of China's nuclear deterrence drives China's nuclear buildup.

Moreover, these concerns will only grow as disruptive technology continues advancing. Chinese and American experts recognize that disruptive technology could impact China's small arsenal but disagree over the scope of disruption.<sup>14</sup> Threats to nuclear forces from SNNWs, such as missile defenses, high-precision conventional weapons, cyber capabilities, remote sensing, and artificial intelligence, will play a growing role in contemporary nuclear security discussions as time goes on. Because no formal agreements exist to regulate these new technologies, strategic uncertainty will drive nuclear proliferation.<sup>15</sup> Additionally,

while engaging with China on arms control, the U.S. government tends to focus on warhead count while disregarding limits on SNNWs.<sup>16</sup> Given the destabilizing nature of these technologies, the United States must begin to recognize the importance of regulating SNNWs for contemporary nuclear deterrence. How U.S. policymakers interact with China on managing these new technologies will set precedence for how to manage strategic instability in this new nuclear age.

While the need for sustained engagement with China focusing on arms control will continue to grow in importance, ongoing political polarization within the United States will make formalized arms control agreements with China challenging to legislate. The United States must adopt novel approaches to arms control with China that simultaneously avoid alienating Chinese policy makers and the polarized, increasingly anti-China chambers of Congress. The United States must shift from the formalized Cold War-era approach to arms control in favor of informal and non-binding agreements. The use of voluntary reductions or declarations limiting the use of nuclear weapons or the offensive use of other emerging technologies, promoting multilateral low-stakes initiatives to promote mutual transparency, and encouraging American allies, particularly in East Asia, to engage with China on matters of arms control transparency stand out as potential solutions to begin working toward more substantial Sino-American arms control.

## **Stakes of an Arms Race with China**

The U.S. military has one of the largest strategic nuclear arsenals in the world. American nuclear power has also strengthened American and allied security for decades. While the United States relies on the quality and quantity of its nuclear arsenal, China uses a different nuclear strategy. China employs a strategy of minimum deterrence, maintaining the minimal number of nuclear weapons required for nuclear retaliation as deterrence. China's traditional security posture has focused on balancing between American nuclear strength and maintaining second-strike capabilities. The relatively small size of China's nuclear arsenal and focus on minimal deterrence enabled China to avoid engaging in formalized arsenal reduction agreements during the Cold War, where the American and Soviet nuclear arsenals

functionally eclipsed China's. The Erosion of Cold War-era arms control agreements and the emergence of disruptive SNNWs drive the contemporary expansion and modernization of China's nuclear arsenal. Simultaneously, the geopolitical rise of China mandates Chinese inclusion in future arms control regimes because of the state's now substantial role in global security and economy.

The United States has the most to lose from a nuclear arms race with China. The size of the American nuclear weapons arsenal is many times larger than China's. Any attempt by China to bridge this weapons divide weakens the comparative power gap between the two states. Moreover, plans to modernize the existing U.S. nuclear arsenal will approach two trillion dollars in estimated costs over thirty years.<sup>17</sup> These costs will inevitably rise if America engages in a nuclear arms race with China. Additionally, an arms race with China would draw in Russian participation to ensure Russian nuclear strategic posturing is unaffected by any buildup. In such an environment, arms control expert James Acton argues that the United States will be unwilling to accept parity with either Russia or China, but neither of them will accept anything other than parity with the United States.<sup>18</sup> In this scenario, the United States will be less safe and be forced to spend more money on an unwinnable arms race. Furthermore, the prospect of an arms race will generate new tensions and create new areas for inadvertent escalation. The U.S. government should explore any viable means to mitigate the threats and costs posed by an arms race with China. Because existing formal arms control legislation does not incorporate China and is failing, U.S. policymakers must utilize a new approach to arms control to engage and incorporate China with international arms control regimes.

## **How the United States Can Use Behavioral Arms Control as Informal Arms Control**

### **What is Behavioral Arms Control?**

A broad consensus exists within the American national security community regarding the importance of engaging with China on arms control. However, the United States cannot force China to participate in arms



control initiatives. With the growing risk of escalation in East Asia, the collapse of Cold War-era arms control architecture, and growing partisanship within the American Congress, a new approach to engaging China regarding arms control is needed. Ulrich Kühn and Heather Williams proposed Behavioral Arms Control (BAC) as a new approach for facilitating Sino-American arms control dialogue. BAC comprises three principles:

- 1) Informality - BAC advocates for informal engagement conducted through joint or unilateral statements to allow for flexibility in identifying mutual areas of restraint.
- 2) Responsibility - BAC emphasizes the value of responsible military behavior, meaning for nuclear security to abstain from destabilizing and high-risk behavior, or contributing to lowering the threshold to nuclear use.
- 3) Multidimensionality, BAC seeks to reduce escalation risks in nuclear and non-nuclear domains, particularly with emerging technologies, and to incorporate other states in risk-reducing dialogue when possible.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, BAC initiatives must produce meaningful constraints and not be merely symbolic.<sup>20</sup> Through these three concepts, BAC hopes to incentivize states to engage in risk-reducing arms control measures until more formal and binding agreements become viable. Because of the inability of both states to adopt formal arms control agreements, informal BAC initiatives stand out as the most viable method for the United States to create meaningful arms control advancements with China.

### **Using Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) to Engage China on Arms Control**

President George H.W. Bush's Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) provide a simple method to engage in informal arms control. PNIs were a series of presidentially-initiated unilateral declarations that reduced the size of the American nuclear weapons stockpile. While conducted unilaterally, the declarations also challenged the Soviet Union/Russia to implement reciprocal measures. Gorbachev and later Yeltsin would accept. Despite a lack of formal verification regimes, the PNIs succeeded in reducing a

large quantity of nuclear weapons. In total, approximately 17,000 nuclear weapons were withdrawn from service.<sup>21</sup> The efficiency of the PNIs also showcases another inherent advantage of the initiative. A handful of people drafted Bush's PNIs, and the initiatives were fully developed within three weeks.<sup>22</sup> This efficiency contrasts with traditional arms control legislation, which often requires months or years of planning and interagency discussion between military and civilian officials. PNIs also avoid the need for Congressional approval, which can prolong or stall implementation as political polarization becomes more entrenched. While PNIs cannot replace the institutional and political strength of formal arms control legislation, these initiatives provide an achievable means of engaging another country on arms control without needing a formal agreement.

Policies like PNIs stand out as effective BAC tools because of their informality, ability to promote mutually responsible restrained military behavior, and capacity to address nuclear and non-nuclear arms control topics. While H.W. Bush's PNIs resulted in the largest reduction of nuclear weapons in history, key differences exist between 1990s Russia and contemporary China. Russia's post-reduction arsenal dwarfs the size of China's and escalatory non-nuclear technology is significantly more widespread than in the 1990s. For these reasons, the United States must focus on pursuing actions to reduce the extent of China's nuclear buildup and limit areas of escalation with China. This focus is to ensure dialogue with China continues on arms control. Continuous and ongoing dialogue can help each side to identify the other's genuine security concerns and to mitigate potential future security dilemmas.

### **PNIs as a Template for Informal Unilateral Arms Control**

PNIs provide a template for the executive branch to follow by quickly drafting unilateral decrees focused on specific areas of tension to promote mutual arms control. The ease and informality PNIs provide can facilitate potential breakthroughs in arms control with China. Policy makers should focus on using PNIs as a template to mitigate and disincentivize high-risk behavior that can increase the threat of military or nuclear escalation. Scholars have identified pledges to ensure human oversight over AI in the nuclear decision making process, test-launching missiles and their payloads into low Earth orbit, and abstain from

pursuing specific niche technologies, like testing fractional orbital bombing systems, as non-binding measures under a PNI framework to promote mutual risk reduction with China.<sup>23</sup> Additional suggestions could also include a declaration to preclude the tacit massing of platforms for delivering air- and sea-launched cruise missiles within range of the other's strategic targets, and a declaration to prohibit the testing and deployment of dedicated anti-satellite weapons.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the United States could also consider a PNI-esque initiative to limit the number of deployed anti-ballistic missile systems in East Asia, which China sees as undermining its nuclear deterrent. U.S. policy could also use a PNI approach to announce a nuclear no-first use policy in the event of conflict in East Asia. Furthermore, the United States could explore the creation of a unilateral declaration announcing that Washington will not target early-warning satellites or other systems capable of detecting a nuclear first strike through cyber means. Such moves would showcase American intent to seriously engage China on arms control and provide the informal means necessary to potentially incentivize China to reciprocate to create reciprocal strategic arms limitations between both parties.

China is less likely to reciprocate a reduction of the American nuclear arsenal considering the relatively small size of the Chinese arsenal compared to the United States or Russia. While China could reciprocate an arsenal reduction, China likely feels less pressure to downsize its arsenal than post-Soviet Russia. The United States should focus on arms control engagement with China to limit areas of potential conflict that incentivize the expansion of China's nuclear arsenal. Additionally, actions committed under unilateral decrees, like PNIs, provide the United States with strategic flexibility. If the United States implements a new PNI directed towards China and China does not reciprocate, it can simply reverse the effects of the decree for a marginal cost. Because of the speed and ease the U.S. government can implement PNIs, America has comparatively little to lose with potentially large gains if China chooses to reciprocate restraint. Informality also enables the United States or China to more easily change the scope to whatever topic either side sees as most productive for mitigating risks. Moreover, the United States should also consider encouraging East Asian allies to follow American initiatives regarding informal arms control with China. The presence

of additional states could further affirm American intentions to promote strategic stability with China and further encourage reciprocity.

Despite historic successes, PNIs and unilateral decrees cannot substitute for comprehensive arms control agreements. PNIs and other unilateral actions can only build trust to a limited extent. The absence of formal monitoring systems for PNIs has created verification concerns vis-a-vis Russia.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the United States must also take concern toward how outside observers learn about and understand unilateral declarations of restraint. The United States must work to communicate with close allies to avoid undermining alliance cohesion and extended deterrence because of unilateral actions.<sup>26</sup> Regardless, non-binding measures that incentivize reciprocity can serve mutual interests. PNIs provide an achievable, time-efficient, and low-cost framework for encouraging China to participate in arms control initiatives.

## **Using Multilateral Declarations and Fora to Engage with China**

China has also shown a preference for working in multilateral fora to discuss nuclear arms control.<sup>27</sup> In conjunction with unilateral and bilateral declarations, the United States should also examine methods to use informal multilateral fora and declarations to facilitate future arms control with China. Because of challenges related to contemporary SNNW arms control, U.S. policy should also focus on using these fora and declarations to facilitate dialogue to generate expert consensus across countries regarding the strategic roles of SNNWs. Benjamin Zala emphasizes that states should use moratoriums, confidence building measures, and track II and 1.5 dialogues to generate dialogue "aimed at identifying the differing perceptions of the roles of SNNW and their impact on nuclear balances (both within and across different states and expert communities) as well as increasing knowledge and understanding among participants of the latest technological developments."<sup>28</sup> This dialogue will aim to address sources of insecurity from SNNWs. Experts will identify how specific SNNWs change other states' understanding of nuclear deterrence and provide recommendations for implementing restraint in specific and limited SNNW-related areas.

Among other fora, China has shown a preference for

discussions done with the P5, a group consisting of the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council.<sup>29</sup> The United States should consider using the P5 format to engage China on arms control. Because of Russia's de-ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and China's traditional resistance to engaging in formal arms control regimes, a multilateral declaration encompassing the P5 emphasizing the no-test norm would be a positive move.<sup>30</sup>

Simultaneously, the United States should encourage Chinese participation in informal multilateral efforts to promote transparency, verification, and irreversibility in nuclear disarmament. Scholars have identified the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification, Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament framework, and the Irreversibility and Nuclear Disarmament initiative as multilateral fora focused on technical, legal, and political issues surrounding nuclear disarmament.<sup>31</sup> Chinese participation would provide opportunities for experts from other countries to engage with Chinese experts. Dialogue regarding China's views of what levels of irreversibility would contribute to future nuclear arms control and disarmament agreements. Participation in these informal initiatives would provide a better understanding of Chinese perceptions and goals in arms control and encourage further Chinese participation in informal arms control engagement.

## **Working with Allies to Promote Arms Control with China**

SNNWs continue to facilitate Chinese nuclear proliferation. For this reason, American allies in East Asia present another area for engaging China on arms control. American allies in East Asia (as well as elsewhere) are beginning to acquire SNNWs that can alter nuclear balances when working with the United States. Additionally, no arms control agreement covers the use and deployment of SNNWs. East Asian non-nuclear states under U.S. nuclear protection see the utility of using SNNWs. For this reason, nuclear security dynamics in East Asia will change as these states continue to incorporate SNNWs into security posturing.

Because new SNNW technologies will erode conventional nuclear deterrence, the United States can leverage limiting allies' use of SNNWs and other sensitive technologies to encourage China to

participate in informal arms control dialogue with Washington. Moreover, Washington should take an interest in ensuring strategic stability with Beijing regarding allied states' uses of SNNWs. U.S. allies' employment of SNNWs remains outside of direct American control and continues to raise the risks of inadvertent escalation with China. In the event of escalation with China, the United States would need to carefully manage strategic maneuvers while relying on East Asian allies not to deploy SNNWs in a manner China perceives as escalatory. Coordination with allied partners during high-risk moments will also present challenges. Scott Wolford notes, "Coalition partners often disagree over what threats to make, what signals to send, and generally how to bargain with their adversaries."<sup>32</sup> Because American allies are now developing conventional capabilities to alter Chinese and American nuclear decision making, the United States needs to establish a clear understanding with Japan and South Korea (as well as other relevant allies, like Australia) on how to operate SNNWs. This understanding should cover how all relevant states utilize SNNWs during times of crisis and provide clear lines of communication regarding how to coordinate responses between multiple allies. Ideally, the United States would clarify topics, such as how states decide to move forces to a forward location or what conditions lead to increasing alert levels of specific SNNW forces.<sup>33</sup>

Ideally, China would have transparent access to knowing the conditions for how the United States coordinates SNNW deployment with allies. In this realm, transparency for increased American SNNW coordination with allies remains paramount. China regularly articulates fears of American-led "containment and suppression" against China.<sup>34</sup> By acknowledging the conditions the United States and its allies would change the posturing of SNNWs in East Asia, the U.S. can mitigate Chinese concerns of an imminent strike from the U.S. military or any of its allies. The U.S. government must emphasize that efforts to further cooperation with allies regarding SNNW use are meant to promote better crisis management and lower the risk of inadvertent escalation.<sup>35</sup>

U.S. policy could also take proactive moves, such as identifying and announcing limitations on what SNNWs the United States will deploy in allies in East Asia. By announcing unilateral limitations, the United



States could reasonably assuage Chinese concerns regarding an American-led buildup of SNNWs near Chinese borders. A declaration related to the deployment of THAAD anti-ballistic missile defense systems in South Korea stands out as a potential area for these declarations to cover. The United States could also identify other areas for promoting responsible military behavior through multilateral declarations with allies. Agreements focusing on the responsible use of AI and limitations on the use of cyberwarfare as it relates to early warning systems or satellites stand out as areas that would benefit most from an informal multilateral declaration.

Moreover, the U.S. government must continue dialogue with allies to ensure misunderstandings regarding American presence in the region do not occur. American policymakers should frame new SNNW policies toward China as a means of managing strategic competition and not as an American withdrawal from East Asian security promises. These agreements, like PNIs, can be limited in timeframe and conditional on reciprocity. If the United States does not find satisfactory progress from China on arms control cooperation, it can roll back these commitments. The United States can also use this flexibility to reassure hesitant allies regarding American security commitments in East Asia.

## Challenges to Arms Control with China

Despite the need for arms control between the two nations, China may simply not desire to work with the United States on arms control. The two parties hold many competing or entirely opposed security interests. Even if both sides have interests in arms control, where both states hold interests do not necessarily overlap. The trust gap between the United States and China may prove too substantial to easily overcome. China may view American overtures as cynical moves to preserve the status-quo, which favors the United States<sup>36</sup> An inability to address the present deadlock in Sino-American arms control will intensify competition and create further instability.<sup>37</sup> Despite these challenges, both states continue to express an at least nominal interest in pursuing arms control and likely do possess genuine interests in managing competition to some extent at least. U.S. policy has an interest in preserving stability in East Asia and limiting Chinese proliferation. Likewise, China can benefit from arms control engagement by strengthening the image of

itself as a responsible power and finding avenues to reduce defense spending.<sup>38</sup> Informal actions focusing on areas of mutual concern to promote stability stand out as a potential solution for addressing this deadlock. Since traditional approaches to arms control cannot produce results with China, exploring how alternative methods could produce breakthroughs is necessary for promoting a responsible and sustainable American foreign policy.

## Conclusion

The rise of China and new technologies threaten to intensify the ongoing collapse of Cold War-era arms control regimes. Moreover, Chinese hesitancy toward formal bilateral arms control, which the United States has employed for over 50 years, warrants creating a new approach to arms control. To mitigate the risk of a conflict with China, U.S. policymakers must identify short-term measures to engage China in arms control. This analysis has identified politically viable short-term informal solutions until the United States and China can implement formal arms control agreements, the executive-issued declarations, multilateral institutions, and revamped U.S. posturing with East Asian allies. The U.S. side has comparatively little to lose from attempting arms control with China and risks short-term escalation threats and the long-term erosion of American nuclear power by China without engagement. These recommendations to unilaterally advance arms control with China through executive decree while coordinating with international partners provide possible solutions to manage escalation.

While these proposals focus exclusively on Sino-American arms control, the United States could also utilize informal forms of engagement with China to clarify ambiguous aspects of the Sino-American relationship. Both states could utilize similar or even the same channels further to clarify topics, like American and Chinese commitments toward Taiwan. Creating and maintaining constructive dialogue between the United States and China remains a critical goal in managing bilateral relations and reducing the risk of misunderstanding.

These proposals for informally engaging China should not supplant the eventual goal of incorporating China into a formal arms control agreement. Formal and comprehensive arms control agreements must always remain the ultimate end goal of informal arms control



engagement with China. Informal arms control is simply a means to mitigate the worst aspects of great power competition between the United States and China while the former Russo-American-led arms control regime erodes without Chinese participation. Absent attempts at promoting mutual restraint, American power will decline in comparison to its competitors and the U.S. government will stand to spend trillions of dollars in funding an arms race that will leave the U.S. less secure. Exploring methods to engage China in arms control to prevent such an arms race can only strengthen American security, spending, and power.

## Endnotes

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