

# Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs

1995 Nobel Peace Prize

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## The Sino-US Nuclear Strategic Relationship and International Security

On 4-5 December 2019 Pugwash and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences organized a discussion meeting in Shanghai as part of the ongoing project “*Achieving Strategic Stability: A New Era of Great Powers Dialogue*”. The meeting was supported and hosted by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. Five American scholars and former officials joined 20 Chinese scholars and former officials for a dialogue over two days, broadly centred on the strategic relationship of the US and China, but with particular focus on the status and future possibilities of arms control, as well as regional proliferation challenges.<sup>1</sup>

### Summary of Recommendations and Ideas to Develop

- Trust, predictability, and dialogue among the great powers are dangerously low, an environment which threatens strategic stability and heralds renewed arms racing. It is firmly in the national interests of the US, Russia and China to lead on avoiding a return to Cold War-era arms accumulation through engaging one another in meaningful and frank discussion.
- “To talk is not weak, it is to shape the future to your own benefit” – participants emphasized the necessity of keeping both formal and informal lines of communication open in order to promote clear mutual understanding of perceptions and risks.
- Missile defense and INF-range systems hold huge destabilizing potential and the US, Russia, and China should urgently explore a variety of measures to cap them. These could include:
  - A focus on system-type limits; for example, an outright ban on portable INF.
  - Limits on ranges or mutual assurances regarding stationing of new systems.
  - Exploring asymmetric ceilings that can account for each state’s security needs.
- All effort should be made by the US and Russia to ensure that New START is extended beyond its current 2021 deadline, an outcome that is also in China’s interests. At the same time, parties could explore how China could join New START inspections as a “privileged observer” to provoke thinking and dialogue on a future multilateral arrangement.

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<sup>1</sup> This report was prepared by Poul Erik Christiansen (Project Manager at the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs) to capture the discussions. The views presented here represent a range of opinions expressed in the meeting, and do not necessarily reflect the personal views of the rapporteur nor of the institutions involved. The meeting was held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules to enable an open exchange of perspectives and exploration of creative possibilities for ways forward. Thus, the substance of the discussions can be reported out, but no item discussed is attributed to any one individual. There was no attempt to seek consensus, and in fact the sharing of diverse views was encouraged.

- P-5 States could present individual nuclear doctrines and thinking as the basis for a renewed dialogue under the auspices of the 2020 NPT Review Conference.
- P-5 States could announce a joint affirmation of a testing moratorium as a stepping stone toward CTBT ratification.

### **Status of the Sino-American Relationship**

The meeting took place at a difficult moment in China-US relations: a number of participants believed that we have arrived at the lowest point in almost 50 years, with the ‘trade war’ in particular affecting cooperation across a range of policy issues. People from both sides noted that, since the election of President Trump, US rhetoric and policy has cast China as a rival, threat, or enemy, rather than just a competitor to US dominance in the spheres of global politics and economics. For many Chinese observers this marks a change in the US strategic posture toward China; yet Americans pointed out that the focus in Washington simply reflects the very central role that China plays in the world economy and international security, particularly the emerging multipolar nuclear order and a number of a regional nuclear dynamics.

A key concern of participants was that US-China relations do not become “poisonous” in the way that US-Russia relations have in recent years. Chinese participants conveyed their belief that many in the US want to suppress China’s rise, and were keen to point out China’s policy is not to become a hegemon: they emphasized that the US and China are the twin engines of the world economy and that partnership is preferable to rivalry. Perceived American “interference” in internal matters – from Hong Kong to Taiwan to Xinjiang – were cast as political point-scoring at the expense of the long-term relationship. At the same time, many viewed an “historical period of chaos” that the US is entering, with many economic, social, and political factors (e.g. polarization, middle-class resentment, disdain of the establishment, nationalism and populism) affecting US policy toward international relations in general.

Participants acknowledged that this is a critical moment in which strategic trust was seen to be more or less absent between the two countries. This clearly presents significant challenges to cooperation across a range of policy areas, and the issue of strategic stability cannot be separated from the tensions in the bilateral relationship. Nonetheless, there was a degree of hope that the competitive framework in which policymakers are seemingly operating can be put aside and opportunities identified where the strategic interests of both the US and China overlap in the field of international security.

### **Strategic Stability and Prospects for Arms Control**

One significant dynamic identified by participants in the current environment was the possibility of an unintentional arms race developing amongst the major nuclear powers because of the lack of constraints imposed in an increasingly unregulated nuclear environment. A tangible consequence of the absence of bilateral and multilateral arms control could be a return to the Cold War experience of repeated vulnerability scares combined with large arms accumulations. Significantly, it was pointed out that China has the resources to compete in the long-term (where the USSR did not), and so participants emphasized that effort must be placed on dialogue in the immediate future.

Similarly, technology advances in the past 10-15 years have compromised the nuclear balance and increased the perception of vulnerability between nuclear weapon states. A second key dynamic raised was the probability that future technological developments – particularly in the areas of cyber and hypersonic missiles – will further seriously undermine confidence in deterrence and political leaders may choose to focus on survivability of nuclear forces. Moreover, it was emphasized that the current geopolitical troubles are being embedded in decisions taken today with respect to modernization programs in the US, Russia, and China but will have lasting impact for the next 30-50 years.

A third dynamic rests upon a critical tension between increased progress on nuclear disarmament and the problem of maintaining strategic stability more widely. It was observed that calls for nuclear disarmament as the key to sustaining the nuclear non-proliferation regime have grown increasingly louder (in particular by non-nuclear weapons states), yet disarmament that proceeds without careful attention to strategic stability “would be a mistake.” In this vein, the nuclear weapon states must engage more earnestly with the NNWS to chart disarmament measures that maintain international security.

More generally, it was noted that, with the exception of New START, there have been no arms control agreements negotiated in the past 25 years. This poor record has been exacerbated by the current US Administration increasingly unpicking the architecture of arms control, with little appetite shown for forging new bilateral or multilateral agreements. Chinese participants felt that, in the past, the US had been willing to negotiate treaties but only those in its immediate interest; with no consideration for compromise, there have been missed opportunities to push forward on multiple fronts that would have benefitted global stability. Overall, Chinese participants pointed to a lack of credibility and sincerity in the US record of non-proliferation and disarmament policy, with the recent abandoning of the Iran nuclear agreement held up as a case in point.

### *Ballistic Missile Defense*

The issues of missile defense and intermediate-range systems were identified as the most hot-button problems for the near future. The abrogation of the ABM by the Bush Administration was seen to have produced a maximal US missile policy “without limit or constraint” and thereby encouraged Russia to pursue its own range of counterforces. From the Chinese side, participants held a clear perception that American BMD is “in front of our gate.” It was felt that the most likely US deployments of new INF systems would be in Australia or the Pacific, any of which clearly threaten China and, in particular, it was strongly underlined that deployment of land-based INF would drive China to expand its own systems.

One participant stated that the US “has been used to thinking of itself as invulnerable” but that the pursuit of missile defense demonstrates a fresh sense of vulnerability. Another cautioned that history has shown that the major counter-move by rivals against missile defense has been saturation of offensive forces, clearly pointing to the inherent destabilizing nature of the program in terms of arms racing. Chinese participants were of the opinion that the US position is deep-rooted, without room for change. A significant domestic problem for reining in the US program was felt to be the entrenched financial interest of the developers and manufacturers in key voting districts, as well as any US politician or leader being seen to be weak on national security by abandoning such a program.

Nevertheless, it was felt that “everyone knows it doesn’t work” and it is therefore in US interests to now explore and engage a global cap on these systems.

Chinese participants were keen to understand what possibilities could produce a more flexible US attitude and a feasible foundation for dialogue, including what changes China could make. Fundamentally, it was said that there are a number of ambiguities in need of resolving through technical discussions rather than dwelling on political differences. Participants felt there were avenues to explore how missile defense could be capped in ways that the US believes it is protected from certain scenarios, and that Chinese and Russian interests would not be undermined. A crucial vector highlighted here is the balance between nuclear INF and “ICF” (intermediate conventional forces), whether China has dual-capable systems in operation, and how the two are disentangled in any future arms control discussions. Chinese reluctance to engage in limitation talks of INF-range systems was well understood given its heavy reliance on these systems, but many felt that there remains scope for engaging in dialogue on related issues, potentially in a US-China working group format rather than formal negotiations.

Participants pointed to the clear mutual interest of all parties to prevent further arms growth in this area. More attention must be given to a variety of measures to cap these systems – both nuclear and conventional – that may include focus on range, system type (land-based, sea-based, air-launched and portable), and potentially exploring asymmetric ceilings amongst the three countries’ forces. It was accepted that this will entail significant verification challenges when compared to the previous blanket ban of a whole class of missile between the US and Russia. One proposal was to begin by banning portable missiles outright and potentially proceed by system-type.

#### *New START*

All participants were keen to see the US and Russia extend the current New START agreement beyond the 2021 deadline. This was seen as vital to buy time to consider and debate what comes next, and furthermore was seen to be clearly in China’s interests to maintain stability. The current US position to renegotiate a new arms control agreement that includes China was viewed as without basis given the relative force sizes. Moreover, most participants agreed that the US position to include China is a pretence for further destroying arms control. Nonetheless, one idea mooted was that China – and potentially the UK and France – could be brought in as “privileged observer” to inspections of New START, and begin to look for areas of dialogue outside of formal arms control negotiations at this time.

#### *Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty*

With respect to the upcoming 2020 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, participants felt that there was “ample room” for more cooperation amongst the P-5 to counter the stagnation of recent years. The non-nuclear weapons states want new disarmament steps to be taken, particularly in light of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It was felt that the P-5 need to work together to “reshape the narrative” and one such avenue could be that, rather than produce a joint P-5 position, each state could present their own thinking on doctrines and engage one another accordingly.

In this vein, Chinese participants were keen to understand why the focus of the US has been on China rather than advocating for P-5 talks and progress. In response it was said that China could do more to

share data on forces and stockpiles under the NPT reporting process which would ultimately gain them credit for leadership amongst the NNWS. One Chinese participant felt it would be important for China to have more nuclear transparency but at the same time noted that this is a separate issue from asking China to engage in multilateral arms control and disarmament negotiations. Chinese participants expressed frustration that the “modest”, “consistent” and “restrained” Chinese nuclear postures were viewed as anything other than part of a defensive posture and that China does not want to fall “into a trap of competition” with other states.

### *Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty*

While participants recognized that CTBT ratification by the US and China would be “a great shot in the arm” for global disarmament efforts, there was a general admission that there is little prospect of this happening. Chinese participants noted the consistent policy that Chinese ratification will be “the following day” after the US but did not view a unilateral move to ratify as possible in the current environment. One US participant felt that perhaps President Trump uniquely could achieve ratification by the US but would need a good reason to do this that is not grounded in arms control *per se*. It was suggested that this therefore could be tied into the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and ratification of the CTBT by the DPRK – a critical dimension of such a deal would be managing the expectation of the DPRK to join as a stated nuclear weapon state, and here China must exert its influence. Importantly, it was pointed out that the North Korean proliferation challenge is a key area of overlapping interest for the US and China, one where they can cooperate toward the same goal.

### **Regional Proliferation Challenges**

Beyond the considerations of major nuclear power politics, the global nuclear environment has been growing more complex and regional nuclear orders are experiencing heightened tensions. Participants discussed the interplay of proliferation challenges in East Asia and the Middle East with global arms race stability and crisis stability. It was pointed out that the US and China have compatible non-proliferation goals but quite different approaches to achieving their stated objectives, as well as differing relationships with the players involved. All participants agreed that the current US emphasis on using sanctions as non-proliferation policy has rarely worked in the past and is having very limited impact on changing either DPRK or Iran’s behaviour.

With respect to the DPRK, it was noted that the six-party talks had been quite productive in the past and that a return to this format may help resolve Chinese scepticism over whether the US is “sincere” in its goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Chinese participants felt the presence of a latent nuclear capability in the DPRK provides a “rationale” for US military presence in East Asia and the opportunity to strengthen its alliances against China, hence the US has not been vigorous in its approach to resolving the DPRK programme. The biggest concern for China was that if the DPRK comes to have a “nuclear identity” confirmed it will lead to a regional proliferation cascade, with the ROK and Japan pursuing nuclear weapons capability and deeper regional instability.

From the American perspective there remain a number of issues to resolve in dialogue with the DPRK, including to understand what it means by a demand for the US to give up its ‘hostile policy’, as well as most importantly to receive a better offer from Chairman Kim than closure of the Yongbyon

complex in return for full sanctions relief. Participants expressed concern that the DPRK has recently been “treated better than Iran” because of US President Trump’s desire to reach a deal for domestic political gain, and that this may result in a weak deal that doesn’t address the underlying and fundamental proliferation challenges. Chinese participants were strongly of the opinion that demanding ‘complete, verifiable and irreversible disarmament’ as a precondition is unrealistic, and that the US may better pursue sanctions relief as a step-by-step measure, which can be reversed based on DPRK compliance.

With respect to the Iran, all participants were pessimistic that a deal would materialize in the near future, given the current course of US policy and Iranian reactions. Chinese participants expressed surprise that US policy on Iran is in “complete contrast” to that of other actors involved, and so “different and contradictory” to that on DPRK, although Americans pointed to the very different experiences the US has had with each country (pathology of 1979 Embassy vs. another war on the Korean Peninsula) and the fact that Iran has not yet tested a nuclear weapon. Participants were deeply concerned by the “bleak picture” presented by the current escalatory cycle between Iran and the US. Nonetheless, there was agreement that reengagement on the proliferation threats of DPRK and Iran could positively impact on the US attachment to missile defense. If the DPRK challenge can be resolved it may meet President Trump’s goal of reducing commitments to ROK and in particular the THAAD deployment that vexes China.