China’s Potential to Contribute to Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament

During the Cold War, China stayed away from most multilateral nuclear institutions and forums while exercising self-restraint with regard to its nuclear force. After it launched its reform and openness policy in 1978, China began to join existing international regimes on nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear security and to develop new regimes with other countries when its economy was integrated into the world system.

Now, China is fully involved in almost all international institutions on nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear security. On nuclear disarmament, its declared policy is still that “[t]he two countries possessing the largest nuclear arsenals [i.e., Russia and the United States] bear special and primary responsibility for nuclear disarmament,”[1] although China in fact has been engaged with other nuclear-weapon states on nuclear disarmament issues.[2] It is time for China to take the next step and work with the other nuclear-weapon states to develop a formal negotiating forum in which they can discuss concrete steps toward disarmament.

China is reluctant to get formally involved in multilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament among the five nuclear-weapon states,[3] but this does not suggest that Beijing wants to build a big nuclear arsenal. It has resources and technology to build up quickly if it chose to do so.

China chooses to keep a small, off-alert nuclear force because it believes that this best serves its security interests. The reluctance to get involved in multilateral nuclear disarmament comes mainly from its inexperience in disarmament diplomacy rather than deliberate calculation. China has a unique nuclear philosophy, and the benefits of the philosophy are not yet recognized and appreciated in a discourse in which the West has been dominant. China fully understands the roles of the nuclear taboo against the use of nuclear weapons and does not consider nuclear weapons to have a military use. (The next section will discuss China’s nuclear philosophy in more detail.) The differing nuclear philosophies obstruct communication between Chinese security experts and their counterparts in other nuclear-weapon states.

An additional difficulty is that the United States is developing missile defense systems that may undermine China’s nuclear retaliatory capability. It is difficult for China to figure out how many nuclear weapons it may need when it faces growing missile defense capabilities in the world. An easy response for China is to leave the option of buildup open if there is not a serious dialogue between China and the United States on missile defense.

The difficulties may be converted into opportunities for China and other countries. If the five nuclear-weapon states successfully create a multilateral negotiating forum on nuclear disarmament, they will have a much better chance to understand each other’s nuclear philosophies. Otherwise it would be very difficult to change the current situation, in which the basic assumptions about the roles of nuclear weapons are very different in each country. Through serious exchanges at a multilateral forum, China’s self-imposed constraints on its nuclear policy may be recognized better by other nuclear-weapon states and therefore spur those states to adopt similar or reciprocal constraints. Some people in other nuclear-weapon states may use China’s absence from the list of countries carrying out strategic nuclear reductions to argue that their own states should not cut their nuclear arsenals further on the grounds that their nuclear dominance would be challenged by China. A
disarmament forum among the five nuclear-weapon states could give China a good channel to clarify such concerns. At the forum, China could also address its own concern over missile defense and other issues as Russia does in its strategic reduction negotiations with the United States.

It is time for all five nuclear-weapon states to consider building such a formal forum to discuss further nuclear reductions. China could contribute to the success of the forum by offering both philosophical wisdom on reducing the roles of nuclear weapons and concrete commitments on the small number and low readiness of its nuclear weapons.

The Roles of Nuclear Weapons

The central role of China’s nuclear weapons is countering nuclear coercion, while in other nuclear-weapon states the weapons’ main role is nuclear deterrence. (Nuclear coercion is the sending of threatening nuclear signals to other countries to force them to yield.) Ever since China began to develop its nuclear weapons capability in the mid-1950s, Chinese leaders have acknowledged the roles of the nuclear taboo against nuclear weapons use. China’s no-first-use policy is based on an understanding that first use of nuclear weapons is not a choice in the real world. Nuclear coercion is a much more realistic threat than nuclear attack. In other nuclear-weapon states, nuclear attacks are regarded as primary nuclear threats and the states’ nuclear weapons are claimed to deter nuclear attacks and some other threats. To deter a nuclear attack successfully, a country must create intolerable damage in the attacker in a retaliatory nuclear strike. A certain number of nuclear weapons may be needed to absorb a pre-emptive nuclear strike and therefore ensure that at least a minimum number of retaliatory nuclear weapons can survive the strike. Nuclear weapons ready for launch have a higher chance to be used in retaliation, so high nuclear readiness is considered to be useful for nuclear deterrence although it brings a high risk of a nuclear accident.

To counter nuclear coercion, a country may need to demonstrate that it has a retaliatory nuclear capability, but its nuclear force does not have to be large or constantly on alert. China’s self-imposed constraints in its nuclear weapons policy are rooted in this unique nuclear philosophy that nuclear attack is not a choice of a national government in the real world due to the roles of the nuclear taboo. If it joins a multilateral negotiating forum on nuclear disarmament, China can make its own contributions to deeper nuclear reductions by promoting the philosophy of nuclear taboo.

There are some new difficulties in conducting nuclear reductions beyond the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The United States believes that tactical nuclear reductions should be considered in the future because Russia has a much larger tactical nuclear arsenal while Russia wants future nuclear reductions to include nuclear warheads in storage because they allow the United States to double the size of its operational strategic nuclear force in a short time. The technical concerns of the two countries are fundamentally different. This contrasts with past U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions, which have been symmetrical. The asymmetrical concerns in the United States and Russia may be a problem for the two countries as they explore ways to reach a new consensus on nuclear reductions. Some new momentum is needed to promote asymmetrical and reciprocal nuclear reductions: the United States cuts its nuclear warheads in storage while Russia cuts its tactical nuclear arsenal.

The willingness of the United States and Russia to cut their nuclear arsenals depends on how they view the roles of nuclear weapons. Some people in the two countries may want their nuclear weapons to serve many different purposes, for example, to deter non-nuclear attacks, to limit the damage of a nuclear attack, or to symbolize the leadership of their countries. These expectations are obstacles for deeper nuclear cuts in the United States and Russia. If the two countries eventually agree that the sole purpose of their nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks, they are likely to be willing to cut their nuclear arsenals significantly. At a multilateral negotiating forum on nuclear disarmament, China will have much more influence on the United States and Russia to encourage them to agree that this is the sole purpose of nuclear weapons.

It is an opportune time to include the topic of no-first-use in multilateral discussions among the five nuclear-weapon states, as the United States expressed its willingness in its Nuclear Posture Review to establish conditions under which the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack and the United Kingdom recently made a new “clean” negative security assurance to all
non-nuclear-weapon states that are parties to the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.\footnote{6}\contentsline {section}{Small Numbers and Low Readiness}{17}{section*.10}

The notion of a nuclear taboo also can encourage countries to cut their nuclear arsenals further. If countries assumed that the threats of nuclear attack against them were serious, they would have to maintain minimal nuclear arsenals to deter such threats by ensuring destruction in retaliatory strikes. It would be difficult to go below the level of several hundred nuclear warheads. However, if they have some confidence that other countries are unlikely to launch nuclear attacks, they can significantly lower the number of nuclear weapons in their arsenals. In the real world, it is an extremely difficult decision for governments to launch nuclear attacks on others even if they do not face destructive nuclear retaliation. The nuclear taboo could replace nuclear deterrence in the role of a brake on launching a nuclear attack. Nuclear deterrence may not be as necessary as stated in the declaratory policies of many governments.

Although there are different declaratory policies on the use of nuclear weapons, most security experts involved in various nuclear dialogues among nuclear states acknowledge the roles of the nuclear taboo. There are two common understandings on the nuclear taboo in these dialogues: No matter what the declaratory policies of their governments are, most participants strongly believe that the nuclear taboo is in effect for their governments, and most participants have some confidence that the nuclear taboo also is in effect for other nuclear-weapon states. The difference among these states is that some experts do not want the nuclear strategies of their countries to be based on the assumption that the nuclear taboo will work and some do. At a multilateral forum on nuclear disarmament, China could provoke international discussions on the nuclear taboo and help develop an epistemic community that fully acknowledges the taboo. Such a common understanding will be a key factor in reducing the roles of nuclear weapons and in leading to a nuclear-weapon-free world.

\textbf{Small Numbers and Low Readiness}

If the five nuclear-weapon states develop a formal negotiating forum on nuclear disarmament, the first important topic would probably be how the United States and Russia further reduce their nuclear weapons while China, France, and the United Kingdom support the reductions by making their own commitments to refrain from building up. China needs to adopt some concrete provisions binding its nuclear force. Politically and technically, it is not a problem for China to make binding commitments as it has been exercising self-restraint in connection with its nuclear weapons. The difficulty is that China is still inexperienced in translating its self-constraints into reciprocal international arrangements. The exchanges among the five nuclear-weapon states at a formal forum may stimulate Chinese security experts to explore possible reciprocal and technical arrangements on nuclear disarmament.

China could make two major, concrete commitments at a multilateral disarmament forum. These commitments correspond to the two lines in U.S. and Russian nuclear reductions.

The first line is reducing the number of strategic nuclear weapons deployed. In their strategic arms control negotiations, the United States and the Soviet Union developed a set of counting rules to calculate how many strategic nuclear weapons each had. The rules have evolved slightly over the past several decades. In New START, the numbers of strategic weapons are regarded as those of “accountable” nuclear warheads, that is, warheads subject to the treaty’s counting rules, on operationally deployed strategic delivery systems. The actual numbers of deployed warheads may be larger than those of accountable nuclear warheads because several warheads contained in a
single delivery vehicle may be counted as one to simplify the verification arrangements. More importantly, the United States and Russia could upload nuclear warheads to their strategic delivery systems to expand the sizes of their strategic forces quickly if they choose to do so. This does not suggest that the strategic reductions in the United States and Russia are meaningless. The reductions in the last several decades significantly reduced nuclear tensions between the two countries and the associated risks of accidents by reducing the numbers of nuclear warheads ready to be launched.

According to START counting rules, China has nearly zero nuclear weapons because its strategic delivery systems do not carry nuclear warheads except in very rare cases in which individual warheads are uploaded for technical assessments.[7] Nuclear warheads are kept separately in storage. China can upload these warheads to its delivery systems but chooses not to do so in peacetime. China’s nuclear warheads in storage would not be counted as nuclear weapons if START counting rules applied to China. When the United States and Russia consider further reducing their deployed strategic weapons by continuing along the lines of New START, China could support the reductions by making a commitment to keep its nuclear weapons off alert. Such reciprocal arrangements should be good for all parties. For the United States and Russia, their cuts from 1,550 deployed warheads—the level stipulated under New START—to hundreds would receive a reciprocal limitation of nearly zero deployed warheads for China. For China, it would encourage deep U.S. and Russian nuclear reductions by committing to a constraint that China already is observing.

The United States and Russia may consider another approach to nuclear reductions. They could reduce the total numbers of their nuclear warheads, that is, they could include in their count the warheads in storage as well as the ones that are deployed. In addition to carrying out strategic nuclear reductions under their bilateral agreements, the United States and Russia have been dismantling their nuclear warheads on a voluntary basis. They could bring the voluntary reductions in total numbers into the multilateral disarmament forum. These reductions are very important as they reduce the potential for a quick rebuilding of nuclear arsenals.

China can encourage this kind of reduction by limiting its potential to catch up with the United States and Russia in total numbers. Because China has a very small stockpile of fissile materials for weapons, some limitations on its fissile material stockpile are useful to demonstrate its commitment to refrain from a buildup. China could make progressive commitments at different stages when the United States and Russia cut the total numbers of their nuclear weapons from thousands to hundreds or lower.

China could begin with a promise to give active support to the negotiation of a fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT). As follow-up steps, China could declare a moratorium on military fissile material production, join an FMCT once it has been concluded, declare the size of its military fissile material stockpile, and eventually join the reductions in total numbers of nuclear weapons. These commitments would be worthwhile for China if they could encourage the United States and Russia to negotiate reductions in the total numbers of their nuclear weapons, a long-standing request by China. The commitments should be feasible for China as it has “delinked” the negotiations on an FMCT from those on arms control in space.

China has some experience in multilateral arms control diplomacy from its active participation in the negotiation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Its support for the treaty is still useful to show its commitment to limiting its nuclear arsenal. Neither China nor United States has ratified the CTBT. China does not have a problem with the content of the treaty. This is evidenced by the fact that China actively joined all preparatory activities of the CTBT after the treaty was concluded in 1996 while the Bush administration avoided any linkage to some events it did not like, for example, those dealing with on-site inspections.

China’s reluctance to ratify the treaty comes from its inexperience in multilateral arms control. When the United States ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention, it made some reservations relating to the arrangements for on-site inspections, but the convention does not allow reservations relating to verification procedures if they are incompatible with the treaty’s object and purpose. China does not know what will happen when the United States ratifies the CTBT. A safe approach is to wait and ratify the CTBT after the United States does. China should continue its full support of the treaty no matter
the status of CTBT ratification in the United States.

If China joins a multilateral nuclear disarmament forum, it would gain more experience and confidence in arms control diplomacy. In turn, this will encourage China to take more active steps toward CTBT ratification and show its constraint on nuclear development.

">U.S.-Russian strategic nuclear reductions, which were symmetrical in the past, may become asymmetrical. If China, France, and the United Kingdom get involved, they will bring additional asymmetrical factors into the process. It is reasonable to recognize the asymmetry, and it is useful to develop asymmetrical and reciprocal arrangements in the multilateral nuclear reductions. The self-constraints mentioned above make it feasible for China to accept two kinds of asymmetrical and reciprocal arrangements: a commitment to low readiness of Chinese nuclear weapons, which can encourage START-like nuclear reductions; and some limitations on China’s military fissile material stockpile, which can support reductions in total numbers.

**Conclusion**

At a multilateral forum among the five nuclear-weapon states, China could gain new opportunities to address its own security concerns associated with nuclear disarmament. Those concerns include the factors that may change nuclear calculations in the world—for example, missile defense. Constructive dialogues and negotiations at the multilateral forum will be useful for China to maintain a safe and friendly environment for its economic and social development.

A formal negotiating forum among the five nuclear-weapon states on nuclear disarmament could bring new momentum to future nuclear reductions. In the last two decades, China has joined or jointly built almost all the international regimes on nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear security. China also could work with the other nuclear-weapon states to develop a negotiating forum on nuclear disarmament. Based on its existing self-constraints, China could contribute to the philosophical and concrete dimensions of future nuclear reductions. With regard to the philosophical dimension, China could promote the notion of the nuclear taboo and therefore help reduce the expected roles of nuclear weapons in the world. This will be useful in creating an environment conducive to a nuclear-weapon-free world. On the concrete level, China could commit to keeping its nuclear weapons off alert and to limiting its military fissile material stockpile. This would be an example of an asymmetrical and reciprocal arrangement to encourage deeper U.S. and Russian reductions in nuclear weapons both in operational deployment and in storage.

The conference of the five nuclear-weapon states on September 3-4, 2009, in London on confidence-building measures toward nuclear disarmament is a good beginning in this direction. The five countries could develop a formal negotiating forum on nuclear disarmament based on the experience of this conference and possible follow-on conferences.

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3. Under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the five countries recognized as nuclear-weapon states are China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.


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