

## *The Chinese Position on Nuclear Disarmament: A perspective*

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Since the Op-ed “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons” by George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn was published in 2007<sup>1</sup>, the discussions on nuclear disarmament have renewedly gained strength. In times of global radical upheaval there is no denying the fact that existing rivalries may turn into large strategic conflicts: especially the relations between the United States and Russia as well as between the United States and China are at a high risk. There have been numerous publications which outlined the steps to be taken for successful nuclear disarmament. This article analyzes the Chinese posture on nuclear disarmament and compares it with the steps that scholars and politicians regard as necessary in order to create a world free of nuclear weapons.

China has repeatedly published official documents that emphasize its commitment to the “complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons”<sup>2</sup> and therefore, in principle, endorses a vision of a nuclear-free world. Its disarmament policy can be summarized as follows: (1) China has always maintained a no-first-use policy (NFU) and has called on the other nuclear weapons states to conclude a legally binding agreement in this regard; (2) China has pledged negative security assistance to non-nuclear weapon states and to nuclear weapons free zones (NWFZ); (3) China supports efforts to negotiate and conclude a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) and has signed but not yet ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); (4) China claims that the first step in a global disarmament process has to be drastic reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia.

### The Nuclear Disarmament Consensus

It is indispensable that the United States and Russia resume their disarmament negotiations, because both the US and Russia possess approximately 95% of the world’s nuclear warheads and therefore should take the lead in the disarmament effort. Analysts

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<sup>1</sup> George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons, in: Wall Street Journal, January 4, 2007, Page A 15.

<sup>2</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China: “White Paper: China’s National Defense in 2008”.

suggest they should either extend the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty of 1991 (START I)<sup>3</sup>, which expires in December 2009, or transform the 2002 Moscow Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions into a full-scale treaty like START I<sup>4</sup>. There is a general consensus that the disarmament negotiations between the two largest nuclear powers should include a cut in their nuclear arsenals to 1,000 or less warheads on each side. It is argued, that a number of 1,000 or even 500 warheads would provide a credible deterrent and convince any aggressor that the US and Russia possess the capacity to respond to any attack with devastating effects<sup>5</sup>. In its latest Defense White Paper of 2008, China states that the United States and Russia need to “create the necessary conditions for the participation of other nuclear-weapon states”<sup>6</sup> – obviously only after the US and Russia have reduced their nuclear arsenals can China join the disarmament process.

An important and worldwidely agreed-on step in the disarmament effort is the coming into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) which has been waiting to be signed since 1996. The CTBT bans any nuclear weapon test explosion or any other nuclear explosion and thus would keep all states from producing new nuclear weapons while at the same time keeping nuclear weapon states from enhancing existing arsenals<sup>7</sup>. The only nuclear weapon states that have not yet ratified the CTBT are the United States and China. An early ratification by the United States is seen as encouraging the few remaining states to follow in signing and ratifying the treaty. Although there seem to be “no signs of Chinese plans to ratify the treaty”<sup>8</sup>, China has maintained its moratorium commitment on nuclear testing since 1996.

Another broadly agreed-on step towards the reduction of nuclear weapons is to begin negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). An FMCT might ban the production of fissile material for nuclear explosives and extend monitoring measures to

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<sup>3</sup> Mohamed El Baradei: A Recipe for Survival, in: Nuclear Security, Vol. 3, No. 9, 01 March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Alexei Arbatov: Superseding U.S.-Russian Nuclear Deterrence (<http://www.carnegie.ru/en/pubs/media/72109.htm>).

<sup>5</sup> Ivo Daalder, Jan Lodal: The Logic of Zero – Toward a World Without Nuclear Weapons, in: Foreign Affairs, November/December 2008 (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64608/ivo-daalder-and-jan-lodal/the-logic-of-zero>).

<sup>6</sup> White Paper: China’s National Defense 2008.

<sup>7</sup> A. Arbatov: Superseding U.S.-Russian Nuclear Deterrence.

<sup>8</sup> Nikolai N. Sokov, Jing-dong Yuan, William C. Potter, Cristina Hansell: Chinese and Russian Perspectives on Achieving Nuclear Zero, in: Cristina Hansell, William C. Potter (Eds.): Engaging China and Russia on Nuclear Disarmament, 2009.

fissile material production facilities that are not subject to international monitoring yet. Hence “an FMCT’s ban on unsafeguarded production of fissile material would place a quantitative constraint on the amount of fissile material available for use in nuclear weapons.”<sup>9</sup> China supports a legally binding treaty and has reportedly stopped producing weapon-grade fissile material.<sup>10</sup>

Today China considers a universal no-first-use policy (NFU) as a major advance in the nuclear disarmament process.<sup>11</sup> It calls upon the other nuclear-weapon states to renounce the doctrine of first use of nuclear weapons and in 1994 presented a draft treaty on mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons to the nuclear-weapon states as acknowledged by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It also calls upon the nuclear weapon states to proclaim negative security assistance to non-nuclear weapon states. This clearly indicates that from the Chinese perspective a more effective approach in achieving a nuclear-weapon free world is addressing the doctrinal rather than the numerical issue. If the nuclear-weapon states do not reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their national security policies and do not become independent of nuclear weapons in military operation plans, the resistance to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and the motivation to improve the existing nuclear arsenals will remain.<sup>12</sup>

### The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Chinese Policy

Unfortunately, China is the only nuclear weapon state party to the NPT which continues to increase its nuclear arsenal. The possible explanation may lie in a perceived nuclear imbalance on the part of China, as becomes apparent when we take a look at China’s perception of its environment. The greatest threat from the Chinese point of view lies in the military capabilities of the United States. There are several issues which are regarded as weakening the Chinese power: in 2001 the US Nuclear Posture Review named China as one of the nuclear-targeted countries, although the US and China had agreed not to target

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<sup>9</sup> Nuclear Threat Initiative: Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (<http://www.nti.org/db/china/fmctorg.htm>).

<sup>10</sup> Sokov, Yuan, Potter, Hansell: Chinese and Russian Perspectives on Achieving Nuclear Zero.

<sup>11</sup> Pan Zhenqiang: Abolishing Nuclear Weapons: Why not Outlaw Them First? in: George Perkovich, James M. Acton (Eds.): Abolishing Nuclear Weapons – A Debate, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Dingli Shen: China’s Nuclear Perspective: Deterrence, Reduction, Nuclear Non-Proliferation, and Disarmament, in: Strategic Analysis, Volume 32, Issue 4, July 2008.

Jing-dong Yuan: China and the Nuclear-Free World, in: Hansell, Potter (Eds.): Engaging China and Russia on Nuclear Disarmament, 2009.

nuclear weapons at each other in 1998 and the Defense White Paper of 2008 reinforces this agreement by stating that Chinese nuclear weapons are not targeted at any country. Moreover, in the fourth US-China Security Dialogue in 2008 China expressed its interest in a US commitment to not use nuclear weapons first against China, which the US have not yet made. Furthermore, the US deployment of ballistic missile defense in East Asia is neutralizing Chinese nuclear deterrent forces. Therefore, the Defense White Paper stresses that a global missile defense system “will be detrimental to strategic balance and stability, undermine international and regional security, and have a negative impact on the process of nuclear disarmament.”

Since it conducted its first nuclear weapon test in 1964, China has proclaimed its no-first-use and no-use policy: China pledges that “it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances, and will unconditionally not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or in nuclear-weapon-free zones.”<sup>13</sup> China constrains its use of nuclear weapons in two respects: firstly, it will use nuclear weapons only in retaliation to a nuclear first strike, and secondly, it will use its nuclear arsenal only against other nuclear weapon states and never against non-nuclear weapon states. China also constrains its threatening posture in two respects: first, its nuclear weapons are prevent coercion by other nuclear powers (“Its fundamental goal is to deter other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China... China upholds the principles of counterattack in self-defense.”<sup>14</sup>); and second, China’s nuclear weapons are at the same time not being coercive itself (China “will not be the first to use nuclear weapons.”). Thereby China maintains a nuclear doctrine of minimum strategic deterrence. The role of China’s nuclear weapons is one of a strategic balance leveler: its nuclear arsenal balances the superiority of U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities and balances the role of nuclear weapons in Russia’s military strategy as their most physical and reliable instrument.

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<sup>13</sup> White Paper: China’s National Defense 2008.

<sup>14</sup> China’s National Defense in 2006.

To fully understand China's defensive nuclear position one has to take into consideration that China developed its nuclear weapons as a response to its perception of being nuclearly coerced and blackmailed by the two superpowers, US and Russia. If China had developed a confrontational or offensive nuclear doctrine, it would have risked the international stability in the region. A confrontational policy might well have led to a counterbalancing environment consisting of all its neighbors along with distant powers like the United States. By carefully choosing its posture of defensive nuclear deterrence, China created a more benign environment for its national and international interests. The defensive nature of China's nuclear arsenal is perfectly consistent with Chinese *realpolitik*: China subordinates all its political actions to its ultimate priority of domestic economic development. Successful domestic development requires a stable and secure environment. Its phraseology of the "peaceful rise" reflects this attitude: China will seek to secure its core interests through diplomatic means rather than physical confrontation.

### Conclusion

The Chinese willingness to join the nuclear disarmament process is highly dependent on US measures. Not only does the precision strike capabilities and the superiority of the US nuclear arsenal, which undermine China's nuclear deterrence, impair the disarmament effort, but the US nuclear first-use policy as well as targeting China and keeping their nuclear warheads on hair-trigger alert make an effective nuclear disarmament for China impossible today. Hence the Chinese disarmament policy focusses on the doctrinal issue (no first-use policy, ratification of the CTBT, conclusion of an FMCT) rather than the numerical reduction of nuclear warheads.

In some respects the Chinese posture on nuclear disarmament remains opaque: the number of nuclear weapons in China's hands is not known and therefore its actual nuclear power remains not assessable. Also China is modernizing and increasing its nuclear arsenal, which will surely have an impact on regional and supra-regional balance and stability. Although China's role in nuclear proliferation has not been discussed here it is well-known that China has been embroiled in the proliferation scandals in Pakistan and the A. Q. Khan network.

If China demands that first steps have to be taken by the other nuclear-weapon states, the United States in particular, it is also reasonable to demand that China offers more transparency on its nuclear policy and force modernization. This might be a first step towards a future without nuclear weapons.

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