

[SE7-CV-2] Engaging China and Russia on Nuclear Disarmament

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Full Summary

The three panelists, Alexey Feneko, Lora Saalman, and Jeffrey Lewis all spoke from different backgrounds on the interdependent issues of nuclear disarmament and the balance of strategic conventional forces for Russia, China, and the United States. While all three panelists agree that Russia and China are committed to disarmament, each agreed that both states are conflicted on the issue due to the size and posturing of relative conventional forces. Russia and China in particular fear that nuclear disarmament allows for the United States' relative superiority in conventional forces to assume a position of increased importance. While no panelist fully committed to the idea that nuclear weapons and advanced conventional forces such as the US goal of "conventional prompt global strike" are commensurate, all agreed that the balance of relative conventional capabilities was perhaps the most important impediment to contemporary nuclear disarmament between the three largest holders of nuclear weapons. Yet the panelists subsequently implied that this issue need not divide Russia, China and the United States, but might perhaps be a vehicle for future cooperation and reassurance.

All participants were explicit in their affirmation that multilateral agreements must be built around China. Alexey Feneko argued that for Russia, Chinese support was necessary to engage with the US on disarmament issues. In particular, he cited the three states' concerns about the potential mobilization of conventional forces and activities in space as key to a multilateral discussion.

Lora Saalman argued that much of the discussion on disarmament depends on a shared assessment of the status quo and a united vision for "strategic stability". China understands strategic stability as primarily an American conception that might still be rooted in Cold War-era mutual vulnerability between two states with an approximate balance of strategic capabilities. However, China is currently redefining their own idea of strategic stability to reflect the disparity in capabilities between the US and China. Chinese scholars have found that their old schema for understanding strategic stability – one that emphasizes a Cold-War balance of power – does not neatly apply to the asymmetrical Sino-US power relationship. As

Chinese policy makers are quick to argue, China lags behind the United States in many traditional indicators of state power, including military and economic strength, even with its high levels of economic growth in the past decade. The United States currently sees China as the only potential near-term peer competitor. China therefore downplays its rise, insisting on its status as a developing country in order to assuage American fears and downplay the potential for a “sovietization” of the Sino-US relationship. Jeffrey Lewis alternatively argues that strategic stability results from a mutual desire to preserve the status quo. He then urges all three powers to jointly define the status quo for nuclear disarmament, citing success defining the status quo over the Taiwan issue as reason for optimism. From this developing understanding of strategic stability, Saalman articulates shared Chinese and Russian fears that the Obama administration might use disarmament to actually further a hegemony-preserving strategy by simply substituting ballistic missile defense systems and advanced conventional weaponry for nuclear weapons.

Saalman notes that while conflicted over the strategy, China remains committed to the goal of disarmament. Put simply, China does not currently have enough incentive to act as the vanguard of nuclear disarmament, preferring to wait until conditions are right. While disarmament is certainly not a new concept, China believes that the US framework for meeting this goal is new and has its basis in Obama’s 2009 Prague speech on disarmament. That speech outlined a strategy that centers on reducing the absolute numbers of nuclear weapons needed for national security, ratifying the New START and Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty, and strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty based upon ballistic missile defense systems. Alexey Feneko remarks that Russia is currently the only state to ratify the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty, which puts it at a disadvantage relative to other nuclear powers. Therefore, Russia’s recent focus in international nuclear discussions has been on the enforcement of this treaty.

China is most concerned with the United States’ potentially destabilizing Prague strategy for disarmament because of its fears that the US will simply replace its nuclear weapons arsenal with missile defense shields and superior conventional forces. Such disarmament, argue the Chinese, is not genuinely committed to peace, but to preserving American hegemony. Saalman, based in Beijing, has interviewed prominent Chinese policy makers and academics and has noted an increase in hegemonic and absolute security rhetoric since the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. Furthermore, China disagrees with the US insistence on transparency in terms of numbers. Saalman recognizes this as a major point of contention for the US and China, creating difficulties for future engagement. She insists that nuclear weapons numbers and transparency must eventually become a focus for the Chinese and US relationship. Saalman further argues that Chinese scholars view American invocations of “strategic stability” as a tactic that is designed to make China more transparent about its nuclear arms

arsenal, deployment, and planning. China resists such tactics because it fears losing its nuclear deterrent capabilities, which rest on ambiguity. China perceives the United States as seeking transparency to build trust, while China seeks trust as a necessary condition before being transparent about its nuclear forces.

The three panelists reiterated the Chinese and Russian opinion that the US would in fact benefit the most from disarmament, gaining a strategic advantage from missile defense and the US research and development concept of a boost-glide enabled conventional prompt global strike (CPGS) weapons system. CPGS is a technology currently in research and development – not possession or acquisition – that allows for rapid conventional strikes around the world in less than an hour. Such a technology is ideal for situations in which nuclear weapons are not usable or lack sufficient credibility, but a quick response is nonetheless required. The CPGS concept recognizes the diverse threats the US has, including terrorist leaders, WMD transfers, imminent missile launches, and high value targets in the context of a larger military campaign. It would be primarily designed to combat highly valuable targets in hard to reach areas. Such a capability might enhance deterrence and assurance by providing an effective and usable (and thus more credible) strike option. However, concerns about future strategic stability as a result of CPGS capabilities create a need for a discussion about the role of consultations in NATO in assurance and extended deterrence. As Jeffrey Lewis notes, it is easier for the US to talk about its disarmament goals because of its already superior conventional systems. China feels targeted and defensive because of their perception that the US has ulterior motives for hegemony, while fearing that disarmament will simply open the door for a conventional arms race. The Chinese do not perceive any nuclear arms reduction by the United States as a significant enhancement to their national security. While acknowledging the dangers of US conventional superiority, Feneko argues that Russia also understands the benefits of the United States' non-proliferation and disarmament goals, and may be willing to support US initiatives to dissuade proliferation without the use of force.

While the current US ballistic missile defenses are unable to actually constrain Chinese or Russian missiles, both states fear that even modestly capable systems might be used as a “mopping-up operation, destroying Chinese or Russian deterrents” according to Jeffrey Lewis. Even though ballistic missile defenses are actually aimed at “rogue states”, the Chinese and Russians believe that such technologies hold their strategic assets at risk. Furthermore, while CPGS refers to a specific research and development concept in the United States, Saalman notes that the Chinese use this phrase as a catch-all for any advanced conventional capability, rather than the specific, previously announced boost-glide concept. Jeffrey Lewis argues that CPGS isn't used for the same missions as a nuclear deterrent – we wouldn't use a nuclear weapon against targets that CPGS would be designed for. In short, it is

an error to simply substitute CPGS for nuclear weapons because they have different potential capabilities and intended uses. While there is certainly some probability that such technologies might eventually progress to become an actual threat to Chinese and Russian deterrents, such fears are currently unfounded. While previous conceptions of CPGS included the possibility of conventional ballistic missiles, perhaps even submarine-based, conventional warhead ballistic missile concepts have been abandoned due to US fears that the launch of such a missile might be misinterpreted by Russia and Chinese as a nuclear missile launch. Therefore, the US is currently only pursuing boost-glide technology that would have a far different launch trajectory than ballistic missiles. Boost-glide technology is technically difficult and is years away from successful development. Nevertheless, Chinese and Russian fears are real and sincerely held, and should therefore be taken into account in US strategy.

Jeffrey Lewis also concentrated on several issues with the New START that have relevance for CPGS. In particular, should CPGS be evaluated on a similar strategic level as nuclear weapons? Lewis anticipates a looming disagreement between the US and Russia over whether CPGS with boost-glide capabilities should be thought of as a substitute for nuclear weapons. The US denies that this category of weaponry would have the same capabilities or purpose. Furthermore, Lewis laments the fact that the US and China do not maintain similar dialogues about CPGS and other conventional capabilities that might stand between the two states and an agreement about disarmament.

Lora Saalman also made several policy recommendations US policy makers that center on increasing multilateral discussions about missile defense, CPGS, sequencing, achievable measures, and mutual understanding of unintended consequences. These talks will primarily be aimed at reassuring Chinese fears associated with nuclear disarmament. However, many scholars acknowledge the difficulties associated with attempting future multilateral nuclear disarmament talks. Chinese scholars suggest that China need not rush into discussions of disarmament until it approaches more approximate parity with Russia and the United States in economic, political, and military power, lest the talks become dominated by these powers. These scholars suggest that the United States is taking advantage of the contemporary strategic imbalance to force arms reductions talks before China has advanced to a comparable, balanced position. As Saalman clearly describes, the issues of “strategic stability” and relative power balances are directly related for the Chinese; any future attempt at multilateral discussion must take this fact into account.

In summary, all three participants agree that Russia and China are greatly concerned about the effects of nuclear disarmament on their strategic stability relationships with the United States. Russia and China both fear that nuclear disarmament is simply a strategy for the United States to further its already superior conventional weapons systems. They equate

advanced conventional weapons systems concepts with nuclear weapons, attributing almost equal capabilities and substitutability. Therefore, the United States program in Conventional Prompt Global Strike, which is a concept for a capability able to strike any target on the Earth's surface in less than an hour, is met with apprehension in both China and Russia. As Saalman notes, the Chinese actually use CPGS as a blanket negatively charged term for any advanced conventional weapons capability that the United States possesses or is developing. Even though CPGS and nuclear weapons have entirely different uses and capabilities, the United States must be cognizant of Chinese and Russian perceptions. CPGS would only be used in circumstances in which nuclear weapons would be neither credible nor favored by the President. Jeffrey Lewis suggests that the topic of CPGS would be ripe for strategic dialogues with the United States. Regardless of the specific issue area, engaging Russia and China on disarmament will be one of the United States' primary challenges in this century. Alexey Feneko argues that future disarmament talks cannot proceed without also engaging China. The United States must realize that both Russia and China fear disarming when the US may develop advanced conventional superiority capabilities. The United States must therefore assure Russia and China that it does not have ulterior motives in order to preserve strategic stability and fruitful relations with these two powers.

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