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RETHINKING THE INTERNATIONAL ARMS CONTROL SYSTEM IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD: THE CASE OF CHINA

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, the international arms control system has faced growing challenges. Bilateral agreements established under a bipolar international order are increasingly less capable of addressing the modern security environment, as the balance of power and nuclear order are gradually becoming multipolar and strategically complex. In this process, the growing strategic role of China is gaining particular importance, which poses new challenges to the existing arms control architecture. In this context, a thorough analysis of China's official position, security perceptions, strategic culture, and nuclear doctrine is of particular importance in order to develop proper mechanisms for the modern multipolar environment and increase the possibilities for cooperation among nuclear states.

The aim of the paper is to assess how the emerging multipolar nuclear order poses a challenge to the traditional arms control system, using China as an example. The study uses Kenneth Waltz's "structural realism", Robert Jervis's "security dilemma theory" and "classical arms control theory", and creates an analytical framework through which to understand the Chinese discourse and assess the effectiveness of the existing arms control system in the current international environment.

The study's findings show that the main problem is not only China's participation or non-participation in future arms control systems and US-Russia-type bilateral agreements. A more significant challenge is that the existing institutional framework is still based on the logic of a bipolar international order, while the global security environment has changed significantly. The paper concludes that in the context of modern international security, the main goal is not to replace existing arms control institutions, but to adapt them to a new context. Historical experience has shown that these institutions have played a crucial role in preventing nuclear escalation and maintaining international peace. While the architecture designed for the bipolar era successfully maintained strategic stability in its time, its effectiveness in today's multipolar environment will depend on how well it can accommodate new distributions of power, technological change, and divergent security perceptions. In this sense, China is not just a challenge to the existing system; it is a test of the ability of international arms control institutions, while preserving historical experience, to respond to the strategic realities of the 21st century.

Keywords: arms control, China, multipolar international order, strategic stability, nuclear deterrence, arms race, nuclear disarmament, international security.

Introduction

"We are here to bring multilateralism back from the brink... 21st century challenges require 21st century solutions." (UN Secretary-General António Guterres).

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The international arms control system is undergoing one of the most significant transformations since the end of the Cold War. For several decades, strategic stability was mostly based on bilateral agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation. These included the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), and the New START Treaty. These agreements were created in the context of a bipolar international system, when the two dominant nuclear powers possessed relatively equal strategic capabilities and shared a common interest in preventing nuclear war through mutual deterrence, transparency, and limitations on nuclear proliferation (Bull, 1961; Schelling & Halperin, 1961; Freedman, 2003).

In the study, the international arms control architecture refers to the institutional framework through which states seek to promote transparency and prevent arms races. This includes three interrelated components: 1. Legally binding treaties and agreements (e.g., NPT, New START); 2. International institutions and negotiating forums (e.g., Conference on Disarmament, UNODA, UNIDIR, P5 process); 3. Confidence-building, verification, and transparency mechanisms that can effectively facilitate communication.

Over the past decade, this institutional system has faced increasing challenges. The deterioration of US-Russian strategic relations, the termination of the INF Treaty, uncertainty about the future of New START, the development of new military technologies, and the transformation of the international system towards multipolarity have significantly changed the strategic environment in which arms control operates (Acton, 2021; Gottemoeller, 2021). The growing strategic role of China is of particular importance in these processes. Although China officially continues to adhere to the “No First Use” policy, the “Minimum Deterrence” doctrine, and the long-term goal of nuclear disarmament, it is simultaneously modernizing its nuclear forces and taking an increasingly important place in the international security system. This circumstance has given rise to extensive academic and political debates about how to effectively include China and what role it will have in the future international arms control system.

Although numerous studies have been published in recent years on China’s nuclear modernization, a significant part of the existing literature mainly focuses on two issues: the assessment of China’s military capabilities and whether it should join the US-Russia bilateral arms control agreements. Relatively less attention is paid to the broader question of whether the existing institutional system of modern arms control is compatible with the multipolar international environment in a way that attracts all the major global actors. Accordingly, studying China’s role is important not only for analyzing its foreign and security policies, but also for assessing the extent to which the existing international arms control system will be able to adapt to the new strategic context.

The study is based on the integration of three theoretical approaches to international relations.

First, the paper uses “Structural Realism”, namely the approach of Kenneth Waltz (1979), to show how the change in the distribution of power in the international system affects the behavior of states and those institutions that were created in the conditions of bipolar strategic competition. It is the ongoing transformation from a bipolar system to a multipolar order that creates the structural context in which the challenges of modern arms control should be considered.

Second, the study is based on the “Security Dilemma Theory”, developed by Robert Jervis (1978). This theory explains how defensive military measures – such as the development of missile defense systems, the modernization of nuclear forces, and the introduction of new military technologies can inadvertently increase the sense of insecurity in other states and further intensify arms competition. This approach is particularly important for analyzing contemporary US-China strategic relations.

Finally, the paper builds on the “classical theory of arms control,” developed by Hadley Bull (1961), Thomas Schelling, and Morton Halperin (1961). Unlike disarmament, this theory considers military competition to be a permanent feature of international politics and seeks to reduce strategic risks through transparency, communication, reciprocal constraints, and institutional cooperation. Together, these three theoretical frameworks provide an analytical lens through which to assess how effectively the existing arms control system maintains strategic stability in a multipolar international environment.

Research aim and objectives: The aim of the research is to assess how the emerging multipolar international order poses a challenge to the existing arms control system, using the example of China.

To achieve this aim, the following research objectives are set:

- Examine the basic theoretical foundations and principles of the traditional arms control system;
- Analyze how China’s role and changing security environment affect contemporary arms control debates;

- Assess the extent to which existing international arms control institutions meet the requirements of a multipolar international order.

Scientific novelty. The scientific novelty of the article lies in its focus on the analysis of China's perspective, strategy, and institutional consequences that China's growing strategic role brings to the international arms control system. In this study, China is considered as an empirical case study through which it is possible to analyze the broader structural changes taking place in the international arms control system.

Research questions:

- How does the emerging multipolar nuclear order challenge the traditional arms control system?
- How does the changing strategic environment affect China's approach to arms control?
- How should international arms control institutions maintain their effectiveness?

The Weakening of the Traditional Arms Control Architecture

The classical arms control architecture was formed during the Cold War, when the international system was bipolar and the two main superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, had relatively similar strategic capabilities. The common interest of both sides was to avoid nuclear war, and it was in these conditions that bilateral agreements and verification mechanisms were created, the main purpose of which was to manage uncontrolled competition. However, after the end of the Cold War, the international security environment changed significantly, and with it, of course, the logic of the arms race. Particularly noteworthy among these changes was the emergence of new powerful actors and the rapid development of military technologies, which posed great challenges to the classical arms control system. (Freedman, 2003; Acton, 2021).

These changes can be well seen if we look at the gradual weakening of the bilateral agreements on which strategic stability was established during the Cold War. For example, the termination of the very important Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which was signed in 1987. This agreement was considered one of the most successful achievements of the classical arms control system, as it created unprecedented verification mechanisms at the time (Gottemoeller, 2021). However, this treaty was officially terminated in 2019, after the US and Russia accused each other of violating the agreement. Although there are still different assessments of the immediate reasons for the termination of the treaty, it's not only the result of disagreements between the two countries, but also reflected broader changes in the international security environment (Williams, 2020; Acton, 2021).

A similar picture can be seen in the case of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The treaty legally expired on February 5, 2026, marking the first time in over 50 years without a binding limit on the strategic nuclear forces of the United States and Russia (ICAN, 2026). Meanwhile, deterioration of relations between the two countries and the suspension of the practical continuation of the treaty have called into question the long-term viability of the traditional bilateral arms control system (Pifer, 2021; Arbatov, 2020). Rose Gottemoeller (2021), the chief American negotiator for New START, notes that although such agreements now operate in a completely different international environment than the one in which they were originally created, they still continue to play an important role in ensuring transparency and predictability. So it's important to keep having them.

Another significant challenge to the arms control system nowadays is the development of missile defense systems. During the Cold War, strategic stability was largely based on the principle of mutual defense. This meant that neither side could hope to avoid a devastating retaliatory strike after a nuclear attack (Schelling & Halperin, 1961). However, the development of missile defense technologies has complicated this logic, as a state creates more effective defense systems, an adversary may feel that its ability to respond to a nuclear strike is weakening. The United States typically views these systems as purely defensive mechanisms against threats from so-called "unpredictable states." In contrast, Russia and China believe that such systems could undermine their nuclear deterrence in the future (Acton, 2021; Zhao, 2017). This process is well explained by Robert Jervis' (1978) concept of the security dilemma: when one state creates new capabilities to enhance its own security, other states may perceive this as a threat, and this further intensifies military competition.

The rapid development of modern military technologies has challenged the strategic environment even more: Hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence, autonomous combat systems, and technologies aimed at countering space capabilities are significantly changing the security landscape and questioning the principles on which traditional arms control agreements were based (Boulainin, 2019; Acton, 2021).

While during the Cold War, it was relatively easy to identify different categories of weapons and control their numbers, today, it is getting increasingly difficult to distinguish between defensive and offensive capabilities. Also, new technologies reduce the time needed to make decisions during crises and significantly complicate the verification process. As a result, existing agreements often no longer respond to technological realities that did not exist at the time of their creation.

Thus, the modern arms control crisis cannot be explained solely by the abolition of individual treaties. The problem is much deeper and is related to a fundamental change in the international security environment. The conditions on which the classical arms control system was built- a bipolar world, relatively symmetrical capabilities between the two major nuclear powers, and the sufficiency of bilateral negotiations are gradually losing their force today. As James Acton (2021) notes, the modern challenge is not only to restore the institutions of the Cold War era, but also to adapt them to a completely new reality, where the number of nuclear states has increased, military technologies have developed rapidly, and geopolitical competition has become more multifaceted. It is in this new context that China's growing strategic role acquires particular importance, as it raises the fundamental question: to what extent can the traditional arms control system effectively respond to the challenges of the emerging multipolar nuclear order?

China's Approach to Arms Control

China's nuclear policy is one of the most contentious issues in contemporary international security debates. In Western political and academic discourse, the rapid modernization of China's nuclear forces is often seen as evidence that the country is moving closer to becoming a major nuclear power. Based on this interpretation, a number of scholars suggest that Beijing is gradually abandoning the traditional doctrine of minimum deterrence and moving towards a more ambitious nuclear strategy (Acton, 2021; Cunningham, 2025). However, such an assessment cannot fully explain how China interprets its military policy. Therefore, it is important for research not only to assess China's capabilities, but also to explain the theoretical mechanism on the basis of which we can distinguish a change in doctrine from a strategic adaptation.

To analyze this issue, the study draws on a combination of structural realism and security dilemma theories. According to Kenneth Waltz (1979), the security policy of states is primarily determined by the structure of the international system. When the distribution of power changes, states are forced to adapt their military capabilities to the new environment, regardless of whether their political goals have changed. At the same time, Robert Jervis's (1978) concept of the security dilemma shows that steps taken by a state to enhance security are often perceived by other actors as aggressive behavior, which further intensifies mutual distrust and military competition. Accordingly, it is necessary to assess how these changes are explained in terms of the state's own security perception.

Using this theoretical framework, China's nuclear policy presents a more coherent picture. Since its first nuclear test in 1964, China's official doctrine has been based on three interrelated principles: No First Use, minimum deterrence, and credible second-strike capability. As Avery Goldstein (2000) notes, from the beginning China's nuclear strategy was not aimed at achieving nuclear parity, but rather at deterring an adversary by maintaining a credible second-strike capability. Fravel and Medeiros (2010) reach a similar conclusion, arguing that China's nuclear development has historically served more to maintain "assured retaliation" than to compete quantitatively with other nuclear powers. This logic is also clearly reflected in China's official documents. China's Military Strategy (2015) reaffirms that China pursues a self-defensive nuclear strategy, will not engage in a nuclear arms race, and will retain only those capabilities that are essential to national security. However, the same document pays special attention to the development of early warning, missile penetration, command and control, rapid reaction, and survivability capabilities. At first glance, this may contradict the principle of minimum deterrence; that's why analysts questioned its credibility, as there are several loopholes (DW News, 2026). Yet, in the Chinese official discourse, these directions are considered a necessary prerequisite for its practical implementation in a modern technological environment (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

It is at this point that the theory of the security dilemma gains significant explanatory power. According to Jervis (1978), the deterioration of the security environment is often caused not by aggressive intentions, but by divergent threat perceptions. This mechanism is also clearly visible in the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China. Washington considers the development of missile defense systems and precision conventional weapons as defensive measures, including Trump's signature initiative – "Golden Dome for America"- while Beijing perceives them as potential pressure on its own credible second-strike capability (Acton, 2021; Zhao, 2017). Similarly, the strengthening of US alliances through AUKUS

and across the Indo-Pacific is framed in Western discourse as a regional deterrence mechanism, and in Chinese official assessments as a threat to China's own security environment.

Tong Zhao (2017; 2020) notes that China's current nuclear development is mainly aimed at maintaining minimum deterrence in an environment where missile defense, hypersonic technologies, space capabilities, and artificial intelligence significantly change the classical conditions of deterrence. Accordingly, we can assume that it is not the logic of deterrence itself that is changing, but the military capabilities that are required to realize this logic.

Such an interpretation differs significantly from the approach that automatically links China's modernization to a revisionist foreign policy. The quantitative growth of China's nuclear forces in recent years has attracted considerable attention, especially after Beijing Parade in 2025, where China showed its nuclear triad-missiles to the world, including Jing Lei-1, Ju Lang -3, DongFeng 61 and many other one of the most advanced missile arsenals in the world, both conventional and nuclear (DW News, 2026). In addition, China's nuclear arsenal includes approximately 600 nuclear warheads, making it the fastest-growing nuclear power in the world, and if current trends continue, the Pentagon projects that China will have 1,500 nuclear weapons by 2035 (SIPRI, 2025; Cunningham, 2025; DW News, 2026). Despite this significant rapid increase, China's arsenal still lags significantly behind the nuclear capabilities of the United States and Russia. According to SIPRI, the nine nuclear-weapon states have a combined total of around 12,200 nuclear warheads, of which almost 90% still belong to the United States and Russia (SIPRI, 2025).

Thus, if China's nuclear modernization is a sign of adaptation to the new security context rather than a chasing of quantitative parity, then Beijing's refusal to engage in US-Russia-type bilateral agreements stems not from political choice alone, but from a structural mismatch between a bipolar-era arms control architecture and today's multipolar realities (Zhao, 2020; Acton, 2021).

Whether China's underlying motive is offensive nuclear expansion or minimum deterrence, future arms control arrangements can no longer afford to exclude it. The Chinese case is therefore an obvious evidence of a broader systemic gap between the existing arms control model and the changing balance of power.

The Future of Multilateral Arms Control

As noted above, China's accelerated production of conventional and unconventional weapons has given it a growing strategic role, which has posed a broader challenge to the arms control architecture. Particularly, the current institutional framework, which was created mainly in the context of bipolar strategic competition, suddenly found itself in an international security environment characterized by rapid technological change and consequently shifts in the distribution of power. Accordingly, this situation raises a logical question: to what extent can the current arms control architecture maintain strategic stability and effectiveness in the new conditions?

According to classical arms control theory, successful arms control is based not only on the existence of political will, but also on structural conditions such as comparative strategic parity, mutual invulnerability, transparency, and the possibility of verification (Bull, 1961; Schelling & Halperin, 1961). These conditions made it possible to establish agreements such as SALT, ABM, INF, and later New START. Despite political controversy, these treaties and institutions (UNODA, UNIDIR, IAEA, Conference on Disarmament...) have made significant contributions to maintaining strategic stability, reducing nuclear risks, increasing military transparency, and managing crises over several decades. As Rose Gottemoeller (2021) notes, the main value of these agreements was not only quantitative arms control; they created the minimum institutional basis for predictability and mutual trust, without which competition among nuclear states would be much more unstable.

However, the very structural conditions on which this architecture was built are gradually changing. According to structural realism, the effectiveness of international institutions depends significantly on the distribution of power, as systemic changes lead to a transformation of state behavior and security priorities (Waltz, 1979). The transition from a bipolar to a more complex multipolar system means that the institutional design which was created to govern the relationship between two relatively equal nuclear powers is gradually becoming ill-suited to the new reality (Waltz, 1979; Acton, 2021). Therefore, the contemporary arms control crisis is not simply explained by the weakening of specific treaties; it is the expression of a deeper institutional mismatch.

In this context, the case study of China is particularly relevant. Agreements like New START are based on the strategic parity between the two states, a long-standing verification practice, and relatively

symmetrical nuclear weapons in terms of numbers. China neither shares this historical experience nor possesses a similarly large arsenal, which can be the main reason why Beijing rejects a model that imposes identical obligations on states with different capabilities (Zhao, 2017; Acton, 2021). At the same time, its growing military developments are already having a significant impact on strategic stability, regional deterrence, missile defense calculations, and Indo-Pacific security dynamics (Fravel & Medeiros, 2010; Cunningham, 2025). As a result, the modern international system can no longer ignore China, nor can it offer the Cold War-era bilateral model.

In these circumstances, a significant part of the contemporary literature agrees that the most effective approach is a gradual and multilateral integration, which initially focuses on risk reduction, transparency measures, confidence-building measures, clarification of military doctrines, and crisis management communication, and only later can it be transformed into more formal contractual obligations (Acton, 2021; Williams, 2020). Such an approach recognizes both the power asymmetry in the contemporary international system and China's particular security perceptions, which increase the political and practical possibilities for cooperation.

Multilateral institutions are of particular importance in this process. Although the Conference on Disarmament has been in institutional limbo for many years, it remains the only universal negotiating forum where all major nuclear states participate in a single space (Müller, 2010; Rauf, 2016). Similarly, the NPT remains the normative foundation of the international regime for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, within which differentiated responsibilities and gradual commitments can be discussed (Knopf, 2012; Tannenwald, 2007). The P5 Process is also gaining importance as a forum for discussing nuclear doctrines, developing common terminology, and sustaining strategic communication – even where quantitative limitations remain out of reach (Acton, 2021). UNODA and UNIDIR serve a similar function, representing platforms for norm development, expert dialogue, and confidence-building in a multipolar environment.

The importance of this process was seen in 2022, when all five nuclear-weapon states recognized by the NPT agreed in a joint statement that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be started.” (The White House, 2022). Although the aforementioned statement did not have legally binding force, it once again confirmed that even in the conditions of the most acute geopolitical competition, nuclear-weapon states maintain a common interest in strategic stability and the prevention of nuclear escalation.

This circumstance indicates that multilateral dialogue formats still retain an important normative and practical function in the modern international security system. The value of these institutions mustn't be determined solely by the achievement of new agreements. The practice of international relations shows that strategic stability is often maintained precisely by the existence of mechanisms for constant communication, transparency and mutual understanding, even when it is impossible to conclude new legally binding agreements. Their historical role is thus much broader than the administration of treaties; they constitute the institutional infrastructure of international security that ensures the peaceful management of competition among nuclear states.

Conclusion

The transformation of the international security system from a bipolar model to a multipolar order has become one of the most important challenges for the modern arms control system. The paper examined how China's growing strategic role is impacting the arms control architecture that was initially shaped by bilateral strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, and later between the United States and Russia.

The results of the study show that the main principles of China's official nuclear doctrine – the No First Use policy, minimum deterrence, and the maintenance of a credible second-strike capability – remain unchanged in its official discourse, though many foreign observers question its credibility because of existing loopholes in the doctrine. At the same time, the strategic environment in which this doctrine operates has changed significantly. Theoretical frameworks such as structural realism and the security dilemma help explain why missile defense developments, intensifying Indo-Pacific competition, and shifting security perceptions could be the main reasons that drive Beijing's nuclear modernization.

Regardless of whether China's accelerated nuclear development motive is to maintain a policy of minimum deterrence or signal broader ambitions, one thing remains unchanged: China has already become a factor that cannot be ignored in the future of the international arms control system. The challenge therefore lies not only in the emergence of a multipolar nuclear order and its potential consequences, but also

in assessing how adequately existing arms control institutions respond to a strategic environment in which China has a growing central role.

The most realistic path forward is gradual multilateral engagement, beginning with risk reduction, transparency, confidence-building, and crisis communication, and only later progressing toward formal treaty obligations (Acton, 2021; Williams, 2020). Such an approach acknowledges both systemic power asymmetries and China's distinct security perceptions, and is therefore more conducive to meaningful cooperation.

At the same time, this circumstance does not diminish the importance of international arms control institutions. On the contrary, their historical experience confirms that, for many decades, they have been among the most important mechanisms for international peace, strategic stability, and nuclear risk reduction. That is why the main test in modern conditions is not their replacement but their development in a way that enables them to respond effectively to the requirements of a multipolar security environment. In this context, the case of China in particular demonstrates that the future of international arms control will also depend on the inclusion of new participants, as well as on the ability to accordingly adapt the existing arms control architecture.

Future research could focus on how multilateral arms control institutions can respond to technological and geopolitical changes. Of particular importance would be a comparative analysis of the positions of different nuclear states on issues of strategic stability, transparency, and the development of new arms control mechanisms.

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Conflict of Interest. None.

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