



BEYOND REALISM:

Alternative Perspectives on Arms Control

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INTRODUCTION

The world is entering a new and uncertain nuclear age, defined by the “size and diversity” of China’s expanding nuclear force.¹ Beyond the expansion or modernization of the nuclear arsenal, nuclear weapons states in the new nuclear age displayed an aversion towards arms control agreements. The New START agreement – the last remaining arms control agreement – between the US and Russia has been suspended indefinitely by President Vladimir Putin and is set to expire in 2026 with little prospect of extension.² Such developments have prompted nuclear modernization programs across the P5 states, and if left unregulated, could propagate into a broader nuclear arms race.³ This sharply raises the specter of a nuclear war, and for the first time, the US would have to contend with two equivalent nuclear peers.⁴

Yet, such developments should not be taken as inevitable. While the realist school of thought posits that in any worsening security environment, states will naturally adopt self-help measures such as withdrawing from self-limiting arms control agreements and pursuing nuclear build-ups to enhance their security, this paper finds that the over-emphasis and reliance on realist

interpretations within the strategic domain has been self-limiting on the prospects of arms control. To circumvent this impasse, this paper proposes two complementary approaches: understanding power and arms control through the prisms of prestige and applying feminist perspectives to identify new starting points for cooperation.

Viewing China’s nuclear program through the lens of prestige tempers the relatively pessimistic outlook of realism while adopting feminist views critically re-evaluates the commonly identified meaning of power and nuclear weapons. This fundamentally challenges and uncovers the invisible androcentric biases of arms control.⁵ As such, this paper purports to demonstrate that an arms control agreement between the US and China is not impossible. Viewing the issue through a prestige and feminist lens not only provides indications that arms control agreements are viable, but the policy recommendations it offers also suggest the possibility of actualizing it.

CHINESE NUCLEAR BUILD-UP: CAUSE FOR CONCERN FOR THE US

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, China currently possesses over 500 operational

nuclear warheads and 350 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), with estimations that it could reach 1000 by 2030.⁶ This represents a substantial increase from the low 100s that China possessed for much of the post-Cold War era. These drastic changes have prompted discussions that China is abandoning its long-standing No-First-Use nuclear doctrine.⁷ This may have serious implications. For example, a CSIS China Power report concludes that the Chinese nuclear build-up disrupts strategic stability and undermines US nuclear deterrence.⁸

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The US has always been skeptical of China's No-First-Use pledge. Former Commander of US Strategic Command Adm. Charles Richard famously remarked that he could “drive a truck through that No-First-Use pledge.”⁹ This skepticism is compounded by China's lack of transparency regarding its nuclear capabilities. Indeed, with

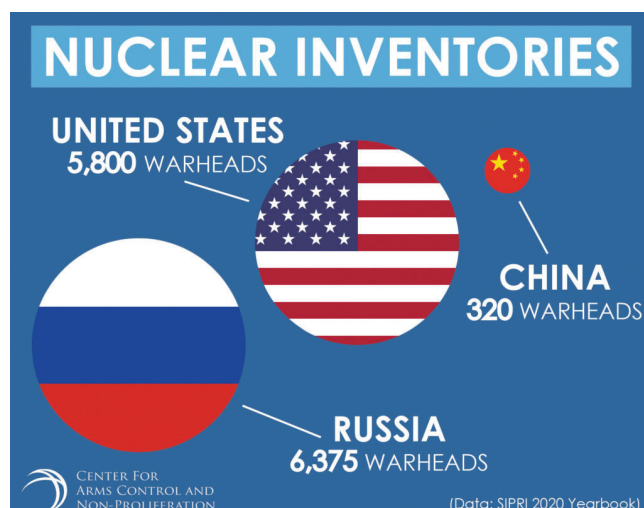
the US viewing the Chinese No-First Use policy and building up nuclear arms as irreconcilable, the US remains highly suspicious of China's true intentions.¹⁰ Such suspicions have even prompted the Biden administration to devise a new and secret nuclear strategy focusing on Chinese nuclear threats.¹¹

REALISM AND ARMS CONTROL

To date, no arms control agreement exists between the US and China. While the US has previously sought to involve China in discussing arms control (U.S. President Donald Trump proposed a trilateral agreement as part of the New START extension) they have consistently rejected these overtures, maintaining that the US and Russia should first reduce their size of nuclear arsenals before any Chinese participation.¹²

People's Republic of China President Xi Jinping's refusal to entertain the possibility of entering into arms control dialogues mirrors Trump's repudiation of arms control agreements like the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty and the “Open Skies” arrangement. Stephen Waltz explained that in an anarchic environment, the systemic effect imposed by anarchy compels states to pursue self-help measures to maximize their security.¹³ Hence, engaging in arms control agreements that might limit the capacity to maximize security appears irrational and unlikely, justifying the dearth of arms control agreements.

Cooperation is not impossible when there is a common threat perception. Robert Jervis underscored the possibility of cooperation under anarchy when the costs of exploitation and breakdown are kept to a minimum during agreements.¹⁴ Given that US and Chinese leaders have often affirmed the dangers of nuclear war,¹⁵ a commonality of interests seemingly exists. Power through realist views should be viewed in zero-sum terms.¹⁶ Thus, China's acquiescence to an arms control agreement with the US, despite having the potential to stabilize US-China strategic relations, may come at a steep





DF-41 intercontinental nuclear missiles rolled through Tiananmen Square during a military parade in Beijing. Roman Pilipey/EPA I Shutterstock

cost as the arrangement limits its capabilities vis-à-vis other states. This engenders a scenario where the overall security of the state may be seen as jeopardized, complicating cooperation.

Realists would be baffled at the prospects of states' attempts to reduce their strategic arms, as nuclear weapons have been seen as the best "peacekeeping weapon."¹⁷ Advocating on the premise that "More (nuclear weapons) may be better," Waltz reasoned that the fear of a nuclear war prevents nuclear war; the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons and the risks of nuclear escalation will discourage states from initiating war.¹⁸ In fact, Waltz displays such disdain for arms control agreements that he concluded that disarmament efforts "make the world safe for the fighting of WWII."¹⁹

On the contrary, reacting to the Chinese nuclear buildup, realists would propose the US respond with a similar buildup and modernization program. As the balance of power is a self-regulating mechanism and the systemic effect of anarchy forces states to constrain their behavior and imitate one another through the socialized act of

balancing,²⁰ shifts in the balance of power induced by China's nuclear build-up necessitate a counter-balancing effort. Hence, to account for the power disequilibrium, the US should pursue its nuclear modernization and improve its missile defense system. Indeed, the U.S. Department of Defense appears to have adopted a realist framing of the issue and has embarked on the modernization of the US nuclear arsenal.²¹ Such developments irrevocably worsen the security dilemma. Realists' recommendations elude general pessimism and are neither helpful nor productive in negotiating an arms control agreement between the US and China. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore how other theoretical perspectives frame and interpret China's nuclear buildup and arms control.

ARMS CONTROL WITHIN THE HIERARCHY OF PRESTIGE

The first alternative would be viewing the issue through the prism of prestige. Yuen Foong Khong describes the current US-China competition as a struggle over the hierarchy of prestige.²² By adopting the capability-based approach to power in contrast to the outcome-based approach, Khong argues that soft power is an equally essential tenet of state power beyond basing economic and military capability as the foundation of power.²³ In that case, Khong first acknowledges Joseph Nye's definition of soft power as the "power to attract" before masterfully emphasizing its importance.²⁴ As states have increasingly leveraged on non-material appeal through diplomacy, culture, and reputation to attract and engage other states, soft power has since become an essential force in shaping global influence.²⁵ Hence, from Khong's conception, Dahl's definition of power can be reinterpreted as "A having power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something or want what A wants *without resorting to coercion*."²⁶ Indeed, this "reputation of power" which Gilpin views as a

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People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers salute in front of nuclear-capable missiles during a massive parade to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing October 1, 2009. | Reuters | David Gray

prestigious state having its strength recognized and accomplishing its aims without having to exercise its capabilities stands in steep contrast to the actual exercise of power.²⁷ In brief, prestige, or simply the “reputation of power,” can be seen as the everyday currency of international relations.²⁸

In this sense, the hierarchy of power includes a key element of prestige.²⁹ The hierarchy of prestige closely follows the ordering proposed by the Power Transition Theory. Specifically, this prestige is organized within a hierarchy where the preponderant power (dominant state) sits at the top.

The hierarchy of prestige leads to three brief observations. Firstly, the modernization and buildup of the Chinese nuclear arsenal reflects Beijing's desire for greater prestige internationally. As economic and military capabilities endow prestige and status,³⁰ China's economic, political, and military power growth has prompted a desire amongst Chinese leaders to develop a nuclear force commensurate with its rising status.³¹ Viewed this way, David Logan and Phillip Saunders hypothesized that China would develop a nuclear force that is larger, more diverse, and technologically advanced. This will allow China to associate itself with

countries that are regarded as technologically advanced.³² Indeed, Haynes argues that although China's perceived insecurity is likely the primary factor pushing China's overall decision to invest in nuclear weapons technology, security is not always the dominant consideration in China's decision of *which* weapons to develop.³³ He noted that China deliberately chose to absorb opportunity costs based upon the presumption that the weapons chosen would bring the country greater gains in prestige.³⁴ Based on this reason, China is unlikely to partake in any arms control agreement as it will be regarded negatively as an attempt to curtail its quest for greater status internationally.

Secondly, examining power transitions under the hierarchy of prestige indicates that the US recognition of China's growing nuclear capabilities erodes American prestige. Given that the US and China appear to be vying over prestige, the amount of prestige conferred by advanced nuclear capabilities is also under contestation because the US would logically deny the level of threat Chinese nuclear weapons pose to them. Undeniably, although Washington is concerned about the Chinese nuclear program, there has yet to be any official declaration that the US acknowledges

or admits mutual vulnerability. From this view, while China is not favorable to any arms control agreement, the US may display proclivity towards arms control agreements with China to preserve its nuclear advantage over China.

Thirdly, China's resistance to the arms control agreement should not be entirely dismissed as outright rejection. While it is a fact that China has yet to establish a nuclear arms control agreement with the US, its participation in the Non-Proliferation Treaty and receptivity to nuclear disarmament dialogues, albeit on a dwindling level, demonstrate some level of engagement. For instance, China has presented a road map towards nuclear disarmament and expressed support for the establishment of nuclear weapons-free zones.³⁵

US-CHINA ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF MUTUAL VULNERABILITY

By framing Chinese nuclear buildup and arms control through prestige, it becomes clear that contrary to realist pessimism on the outlook for arms control agreements, U.S.-China arms control cooperation is not impossible. Importantly, these diagnoses point out that the critical element missing to properly reinvigorate US and China arms control talks lies in the US recognition of mutual vulnerability because it refuses to acknowledge China's capability. This prompts China's continuation of its nuclear modernization program and rejection of arms control. Indeed, Chinese strategists had conditioned the mutual acknowledgment of vulnerability as an indication of strategic stability.³⁶ To them, the acknowledgment will greatly assuage the Chinese that the US is not aiming at fully negating China's second strike capability.³⁷ There are ways that both can gain prestige, even with American acknowledgment. A constructive first step would involve China outlining and presenting a mutually agreeable framework about its specific expectations of a mutually vulnerable relationship. Clarifying expectations and setting the record straight would alleviate US policymakers' concerns about Chinese intentions.

By taking the initiative, China could gain additional prestige by demonstrating the level of maturity demanded of great power. At the same time, the US would not lose its reputation of power as it can frame the process as one where China is the actor urgently and proactively seeking cooperation.

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Certainly, the acknowledgment is only the first step and more must be done to deliver an arms control agreement. Given the hierarchy of prestige within the context of power transition, the US and China may still contest and dispute over the finer details. A longer-term approach to supplement earlier recommendations would involve reconceptualizing and presenting arms control as a mechanism that enhances prestige rather than diminishes it. Arms control is inherently prestige-granting, so by reframing participation and instituting arms control agreements as a tool to gain prestige, both states would have greater impetus to broker an agreement.



ICBM ballistic missile being launched, blurred China flag in foreground. Chinese weapons of mass destruction concept. | Generative AI Lubo Ivanko | public domain



Several modern Chinese military ballistic nuclear rockets war threat. | neirfy | Adobe Stock

To achieve this, arms control should be understood not as a “concession” or an “imposition of limits” but as an attestation of “leadership” and “responsibility” befitting great power status. By framing and positioning arms control agreements as a testament to their ability to shape and enforce global norms of non-proliferation, the US and China can demonstrate their level of prestige internationally. Simply put, it will be prestigious for the US and China to get themselves and the rest of the world into an arms control agreement.

FEMINIST VIEW OF ARMS CONTROL

Working in tandem with viewing arms control through the lens of prestige would be by examining arms control through a feminist lens. As feminist studies sought to shed light on women’s influence and contributions to the world, the dependence of the people with power (usually men) on women would expose a world system heavily dependent on artificial notions of masculinity.³⁸ Given that the assumptions associated with the masculinized world system are more constitutive than causal, adopting a feminist viewpoint presents an alternative perspective that can challenge and deconstruct the dominant entrenched assumptions and viewpoints of the international phenomenon.

Adopting this alternative viewpoint may present significant opportunities for a more critical examination of key issues like nuclear arms control.³⁹ Indeed, this approach would align more with the critical theory that Robert Cox describes,⁴⁰ as feminism expresses deep skepticism about “universal” knowledge claims and believes that this knowledge has been predominantly based on men’s lives and perspectives.⁴¹

Carol Cohn’s work adds tremendous value to the analysis of nuclear weapons from a feminist view exploring the “ubiquitous weight of gender, both in social relations and in the language itself.”⁴² Cohn navigates through sexualized language in the strategic community, such as “*more bang for the buck*” in describing nuclear weapons efficiency, “*vertical erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs, deep penetration,*” to portray the mechanism of nuclear attacks. Indeed, feminists collectively argue that such technical descriptions and interpretations reflect long-established patriarchal views of nuclear weapons. Best surmised by Austrian Ambassador Alexander Kmentt that “nuclear weapons states feed on each other’s threat perception.”⁴³ It is no surprise why an arms control agreement between the US and China



Carol Cohn participating in a panel called “After War, Gender Equality Needs Investment Too” sponsored by the U.S. Institute of Peace. | U.S. Institute of Peace | CC BY 2.0

has proven elusive, because deeply entrenched patriarchal interpretations of nuclear weapons has inadvertently motivated nuclear powers to pursue greater nuclear arsenal as a way to compensate for its perceived lack of security (masculinity).

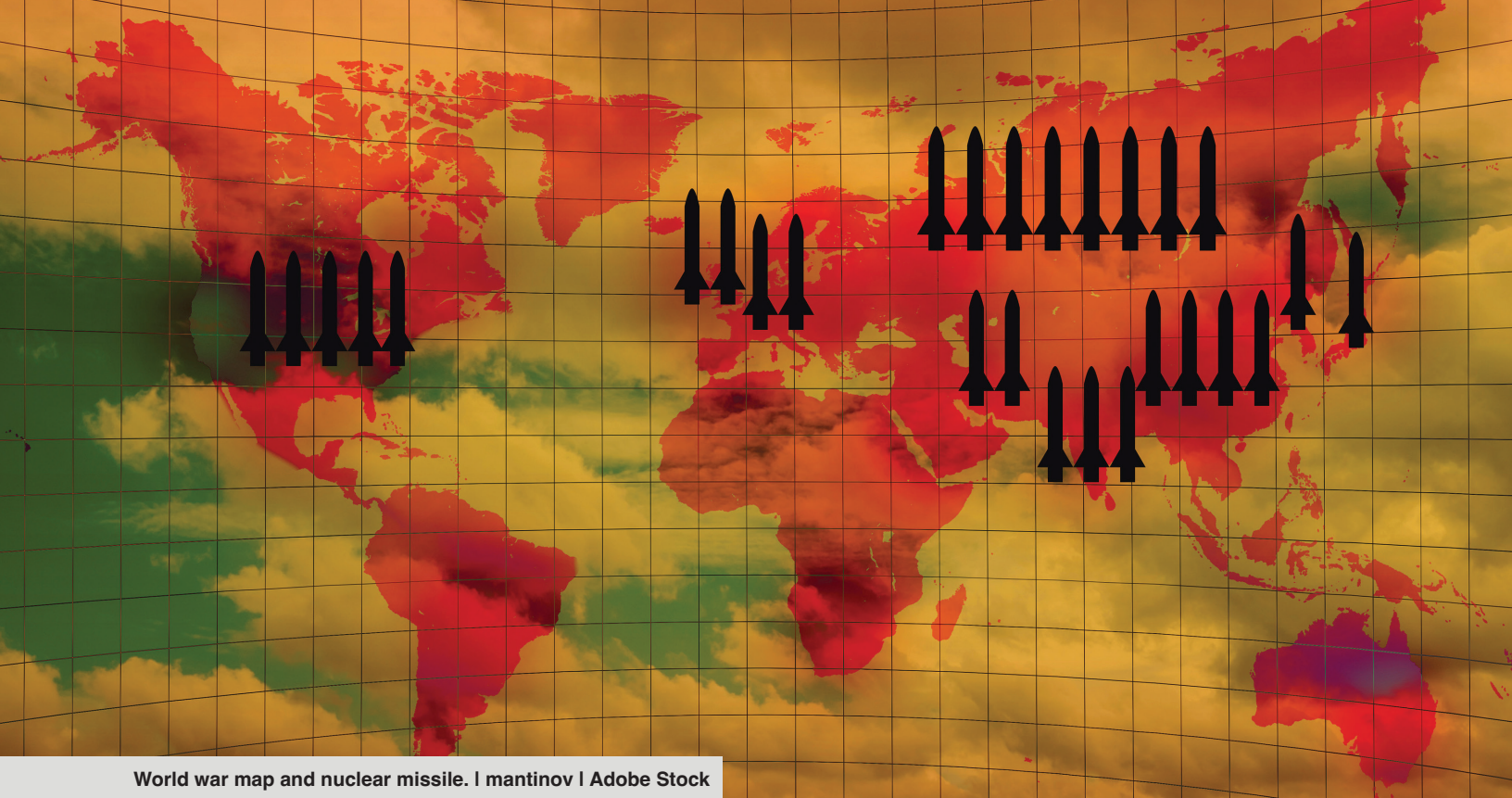
Hence, the primary task of revitalizing U.S.-China arms control dialogues would be to examine strategic concepts from alternative perspectives to facilitate the breaking down of masculine terms. To re-construct this “grounded normativity,”⁴⁴ it becomes essential to go beyond just critiquing the effects of institutions, practices, and discourses that have been long established and accepted,⁴⁵ and investigate what possibilities emerge when challenges are made to what constitutes normative.⁴⁶ While the commonly accepted view of deterrence is centered around the preservation of the status quo and defense, Cohn contends that akin to the metaphor of “father carrying a bigger stick,” deterrence reflects the drive of a superior power trying to exercise its will by threatening the disproportionate use of force against an adversary.⁴⁷ This interpretation of “deterrence” coincides with the Chinese view that deterrence includes compellent elements.⁴⁸ To investigate the impact of a feminist perspective further, a series of scientific studies involving the causes and effects of nuclear war must be undertaken to demonstrate the variety of existing interpretations. This, coupled

with public campaigns, could generate more attention, which could challenge the notion that there is only a masculinized militarized view of nuclear weapons and security. This attests to the potential that feminist interpretation has in unlocking divergent understandings of security, which could reduce US-China threat perceptions and work towards reconciling their differences.

To be sure, feminism is one of many interpretations necessary to challenge the dominant views. Acheson acknowledges that to properly upend the “grounded normativity,” diverse voices from feminist, racial, indigenous, queer, and other communities must be incorporated.⁴⁹ Presenting solidarity in critique and activism then forces space for an honest accounting of the true utility of nuclear weapons while, at the same time, allowing society to redefine its social relations with nuclear weapons.⁵⁰ This may provide an overarching breakdown of traditional views of security nuclear weapons allegedly conferred. To borrow the iconic quote from nuclear strategist Bernard Brodie, the chief purpose of nuclear weapons would be to avoid its use.⁵¹ By questioning the security dimensions of nuclear weapons, the utility of nuclear weapons may be reduced to nothing. Consequently, arms control agreements, not limited to just the US and China, become attainable.

COMPATIBILITY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is tempting to argue for one better viewpoint, this paper suggests that the recommendations proposed by examining the issue through prestige or feminism are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, given that all recommendations belong to different time horizons, both perspectives can work simultaneously to supplement one another. The prestige view addresses immediate concerns by framing arms control as a way to enhance status, fostering short to medium-term cooperation. Conversely, the feminist approach seeks a deeper and systematic transformation of the strategic discourses and reimagining security in ways that make arms control logical and necessary. From



World war map and nuclear missile. | mantinov | Adobe Stock

this view, the temporal dimension suggests that the recommendations could overlap and collaborate.

CONCLUSION

China's nuclear build-up and its lukewarm attitude towards arms control have proven worrisome not just to the US, but to the international community. Realism argues that arms control is futile. This paper argues that the dominance of realism within the strategic domain has created a self-limiting effect on the prospects of arms control. Consequently, this may lead to a worsening security dilemma and subsequent nuclear arms race, thereby raising the specter of a nuclear war. By adopting alternative perspectives through viewing arms control from the prisms of prestige and feminism, the prospects of arms control do not appear as grim or impossible as illustrated previously.

Indeed, viewing arms control through prestige presents a way to understand that China's nuclear program has been based on gaining prestige, and so arms control is seen as a deliberate attempt to deny its prestige. As such, the paper recommends that the US first recognize its vulnerability to Chinese nuclear weapons as a first step towards arms control. This will be supplemented by

efforts to induce a perceptual shift that reflects arms control as prestige granting rather than prestige denying.

Furthermore, by questioning established views of security and nuclear weapons, feminism could deconstruct the masculinized interpretations of security. This opens up the space for other interpretations to demand an honest accounting of the true utility of nuclear weapons. This would allow society to redefine its social relations with nuclear weapons. Hence, with nuclear weapons not being viewed through a traditional security lens, arms control agreements may then be pushed to the forefront.

In summary, the prospects of the U.S.-China arms control agreement are not insurmountable. By confronting the dominant realist views and challenging its entrenched assumptions, alternative narratives could take shape and illuminate new pathways to cooperation. Departing from the competitive paradigms and reimagining security as a shared effort could be the first step to fostering cooperation and actualizing the US-China arms control agreement.



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