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# CHINA ON ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

by

KARL W. EIKENBERRY

The leaders of the People's Republic of China have often referred to their position on arms control and disarmament as consistent and principled.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is clear that since 1949 Beijing's arms control policies have been dynamic, reflecting and supporting changing ideological, military, economic, and foreign policy objectives. Although shifts in China's arms control posture have been subtle and incremental, it is possible to identify distinct policy lines associated with particular periods of time during the PRC's brief history. It is useful to trace the evolution of China's attitude toward arms control and disarmament and to compare major policy themes in order to clarify the relationship between the PRC's national objectives and its specific stands on arms control. A thorough understanding of this relationship is important in suggesting how China, the world's third most important nuclear power, will assess and approach global arms control issues in the future.

## SINO-SOVIET SOLIDARITY: 1949-1960

From the establishment of the PRC in 1949 until 1960, China generally followed the lead of the Soviet Union in formulating its arms control and disarmament policy. This is attributable to two factors: first, there was a considerable commonality of interests between the two countries during this period, and second, the PRC was willing to show solidarity with the Soviet Union in return for

Moscow's support against China's "imperialist," nuclear-armed adversary, the United States.

The Chinese leadership seemed to disparage the value of nuclear weapons during the first years of the PRC. As early as 1946, Mao Zedong announced:

The birth of the atom bomb was the beginning of the end of the American imperialists. For they began to rely on the bomb and not on the people . . . . In the end the bomb will not annihilate the people. The people will annihilate the bomb.<sup>2</sup>

Although such confidence reflected the Marxist-Leninist tenet that men, and not weapons, play the decisive role in war, Mao had few weapons at his disposal and was probably making a virtue out of necessity. In fact, in spite of rhetoric which denigrated nuclear weapons as "paper tigers," both the Soviet Union and the PRC did increase their respect for the implications of nuclear warfare during the 1950s, and Moscow's singular emphasis on total nuclear disarmament was in consonance with this growing awareness of the communist world's strategic vulnerability. The United States held an overwhelming lead in strategic weapons over the Soviet Union, and unrealistic proposals for total disarmament provided Moscow with an opportunity to close the nuclear arms gap while still portraying itself as responsive to calls from the world community for decisive action in the arms control and disarmament

arena. At the same time, emphasis on nuclear disarmament supported the PRC in another important respect since it avoided the issue of Beijing's primary asset—its massive, if primitive, conventional army.

By the late 1950s, the Soviet Union began to embark on a very different approach, advocating nuclear arms control instead of disarmament. In 1956, the Soviets proposed a ban on thermonuclear testing, a nuclear-free zone in Germany, and mutual reductions in the defense expenditures of the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, China decided to develop its own nuclear weapons and sought technical assistance from the Soviets. Khrushchev's favorable response led to the signing of a bilateral Sino-Soviet agreement in October 1957.<sup>4</sup> Encouraged by this and the perception that *Sputnik* had dramatically shifted the strategic balance of power from Washington to Moscow, Beijing was willing to accommodate its socialist patron's changing arms control line. By 1959, Zhou Enlai paralleled the Soviet line by advocating "the establishment of an area free of atomic weapons, an area of peace, throughout the whole of East Asia and the Pacific Region."<sup>5</sup>

#### BEIJING'S INDEPENDENT LINE: 1960-1964

Sino-Soviet differences on a broad range of issues started to become evident to the outside world by 1960, and by 1964 an independent policy on arms control and disarmament emerged from Beijing. In January 1960 the head of China's nuclear weapons program, Nie Rongzhen, reported to his senior leaders that USSR technical support had become problematic.<sup>6</sup> The Soviets removed their technical advisors from China in October 1960, and the PRC was left to fend for itself. Feeling itself strategically isolated and vulnerable, China rapidly pursued the development of atomic weapons. The PRC strongly opposed the partial test ban treaty offered by the United States and Great Britain, denouncing it as "nuclear blackmail," and supported the Soviet Union's initial rejection of the proposal.<sup>7</sup>

When the Soviets reversed their position and signed the treaty on 5 August 1963, China caustically called the ban an "extremely dangerous fraud."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, it registered its opposition during this period to the Soviet Union's call for general and complete disarmament.<sup>9</sup> These positions were consistent with the PRC's ideological and military objectives. Ideologically, the Chinese were not prepared to renounce force in their struggle with imperialism; supporting general and complete disarmament would indicate such a renunciation. More important, the PRC was unwilling to see itself permanently denied strategic parity with the superpowers, which seemed implicit in acquiescence to the partial test ban treaty. In fact, without any significant allies, China actually argued for nuclear proliferation, claiming in August 1963:

Did the danger of nuclear war become greater or less when the number of nuclear weapons increased from one to two? We say it becomes less, not greater. Whether or not nuclear weapons help peace depends on who possesses them. It is detrimental to peace if they are in the hands of imperialist countries; it helps peace if they are in the hands of socialist countries. It must not be said indiscriminately that the danger of nuclear war increases along with the increase in the number of nuclear powers.<sup>10</sup>

However, China did feel compelled to rationalize its rejection of American and Soviet arms control and disarmament proposals, which had begun to enlist some global support. On 31 July 1963, Beijing offered its own three-point proposal for disarmament, calling for:

- The total prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons as well as research, testing, and the means of production.
- The elimination of overseas military bases, the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in Asia and the Pacific, a ban on the import or export of nuclear arms, and a total ban of nuclear tests.
- A conference of all of the heads of states of the world to discuss a comprehensive

test ban and the elimination of nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup>

Beijing's pursuit of its own military and foreign policy objectives was evident in this lofty plan. The first point was designed to break the superpowers' nuclear duopoly, the second to establish China's military dominance in Asia by removing the American nuclear and conventional threat, and the third to rally the Third World to its cause by insisting on democratizing the arms control and disarmament process.

#### CHINA AS A NUCLEAR POWER: 1964-1971

On 15 October 1964 the PRC achieved its first nuclear explosion, an event that heralded a new approach in Beijing toward arms control and disarmament. Immediately after its initial atomic test, China announced a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons and emphasized the defensive nature of its nuclear strategy, themes which have remained unchanged since.<sup>12</sup> The no-first-use doctrine was and remains prudent given China's nuclear inferiority vis-a-vis the superpowers. China's doctrine parallels that of the Soviet Union in the 1950s when Moscow consistently renounced the first use of nuclear weapons in the face of overwhelming American superiority.<sup>13</sup> With only a miniscule arsenal at its disposal, China gained the moral high ground while sacrificing nothing militarily through its abandonment of a first-strike option. Nevertheless, the PRC was genuinely concerned about alarming both the superpowers and its Asian neighbors with its aggressive nuclear program and found it useful to stress its defensive strategy. By 1966 militant calls for revolution emanating from Beijing were tempered with statements expressing the "sincere hope" that nuclear war could be avoided and the conviction that it could be if the "peace-loving" countries of the world showed resolve.<sup>14</sup>

Still, the PRC remained ambivalent toward nuclear weapons. Beijing feared that an excessively timid posture could breed defeatism within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and encourage the superpowers

at the very time when tensions were increasing along the Sino-Soviet frontier and in Vietnam. The Chinese assigned their nuclear forces a mission of "minimum deterrence" and continued to advocate Mao's "people's war" in which the human factor would triumph over the material factor.<sup>15</sup>

During the middle and late 1960s, China, as the self-proclaimed champion of the Third World, continued efforts to justify its opposition to the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the 1971 Sea-Bed Treaty, all of which had gained significant, if qualified, support within the world community. First, Beijing argued ideologically that its nuclear weapons program was a "great encouragement" to the revolutionary masses.<sup>16</sup> Second, it stressed that the treaties of this period were meaningless agreements sponsored by the superpowers in order to deceive the people of the world and guarantee the Soviet-American nuclear duopoly. Third, Chinese leaders proclaimed, somewhat defensively, that China had been forced to develop nuclear weapons because the United States would not adopt a no-first-use policy.<sup>17</sup>

However, Beijing prudently ensured that its vociferous opposition to superpower arms control policies did not lead to reckless provocation. For instance, despite its opposition to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, China did not actively encourage proliferation. Only one year after China's first nuclear explosion, PRC Foreign Minister

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Chen Yi said that while China would lend assistance to other countries in their peaceful pursuit of atomic energy, the entire question of helping others to develop atomic weapons was "not realistic."<sup>18</sup> However, although opposition to the arms control treaties of this period furthered the PRC's national objectives, undoubtedly Beijing's hostility was intensified by its lack of representation in the organization which had sponsored and facilitated these agreements, the United Nations.

#### INTEGRATION INTO THE WORLD COMMUNITY: 1971-1980

On 15 November 1971, China was admitted to the United Nations, and its line on arms control and disarmament changed over the next decade as the PRC adjusted to its newly found prestige and respectability within the international order. Qiao Guanhua, the PRC's representative to the United Nations, told the General Assembly in late 1971 that the superpowers' continued buildup of nuclear arms was threatening world peace. Qiao advocated total nuclear disarmament, and suggested that as a first step in attaining this goal, the nuclear powers should adopt a no-first-use policy. He also posited that the establishment of nuclear-free zones, a concept which was gaining considerable Third World support, should be predicated on the no-first-use policy of the nuclear powers as well as the elimination of all overseas nuclear forces and bases.<sup>19</sup> Beijing still found itself in a position of nuclear inferiority and militarily could not subscribe to anything less than total nuclear disarmament. Meanwhile, it continued to ignore the call for general and complete disarmament, which was true to its Marxist-Leninist ideology and national defense requirements.

Nevertheless, small shifts in the PRC's approach to arms control could be found in Qiao's emphasis on nuclear-free zones, clearly an effort to capture Third World support. Even more interesting was the retreat from its former position demanding an elimination of all overseas bases; now it

was only necessary to remove nuclear weapons based abroad to achieve nuclear-free zones. The PRC, which by 1971 viewed the Soviet Union as the primary threat to itself and to world peace, was possibly giving tacit support to an American presence in Asia and the Pacific by compromising on its earlier stand on overseas military bases.

Several more obvious changes to China's arms control and disarmament policy occurred in the 1970s. First, in 1974 Beijing ratified Protocol II of the Treaty For the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America (Treaty of Tlatelolco). This was the first arms control agreement accepted by the PRC since its ratification in the early 1950s of the 1925 Geneva protocol on chemical and bacteriological weapons.<sup>20</sup> The prerequisites for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone that China had announced in 1971 had not been met, yet it acceded to the treaty. The compromise reflected its concern with being considered an outcast of the world community and its willingness to respond to Third World pressure in order to legitimize its claim to leadership.<sup>21</sup>

A second major shift in China's arms control line became evident in 1978 when it agreed to participate in the Special Session at the UN General Assembly on Disarmament, promoted by the nonaligned bloc. Beijing in the early 1970s had announced that it "would never betray the non-nuclear nations by joining nuclear disarmament negotiations at which the big nuclear powers presided,"<sup>22</sup> and China had belittled arms control efforts in the absence of positive superpower initiatives. Although the PRC could correctly argue that the special session on disarmament was not a conference manipulated by the "big nuclear powers," it is clear that Beijing was willing to modify its position to keep its Third World credentials in order. In addition, its qualified support for the United Nations' Disarmament Commission, established in 1979, signaled China's growing interest in involving itself in international arms control dialogues.

Finally, the PRC departed from its narrow focus on nuclear armaments and

adopted the position that the danger of war could only be eliminated if both conventional and nuclear weapons were reduced simultaneously. It called on the superpowers to make massive reductions in their force structures as a step preliminary to the convening of meaningful global arms reduction talks.<sup>23</sup> The newly placed emphasis on both conventional and nuclear arms reductions reflected China's concern with the massive Soviet buildup of conventional and tactical nuclear forces along the Sino-Soviet frontier during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. (Recent discussions with the PLA on the employment of tactical nuclear weapons would indicate the Chinese High Command is at least contemplating the possibility of nuclear war-fighting beneath the strategic threshold.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Beijing, which shares a long border with the Soviet Union, may now be more sensitive to its military vulnerability over a wide spectrum of conventional and nuclear force thresholds and feel that strategic arms control of itself does not enhance the security of the nation.)

Despite signs of growing flexibility and moderation on certain issues, the PRC still remained opposed to any arms control proposals that it found clearly detrimental to its security, even when such opposition ran counter to Third World opinion. As Beijing became increasingly preoccupied with the containment of Moscow, it excoriated Soviet disarmament proposals at the United Nations as "hollow talk."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it generally denounced both SALT I and II as "sham arms control."<sup>26</sup> China's major grievance with SALT was that it did not effectively curtail superpower efforts to achieve nuclear superiority. The overwhelming American and Soviet quantitative lead over the PRC in nuclear weapons made SALT quotas of little value to Beijing. Furthermore, SALT did not convincingly restrain the superpowers from making qualitative improvements to their nuclear forces. China, already lagging some 20 years behind the United States and Soviet Union in its strategic force technology, could not afford militarily to allow the superpowers to deploy new, more sophisticated weapon systems that would reduce the credibility of

the PRC's nuclear deterrent.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the commitment of excessive resources into strategic weapon research and development is at odds with Beijing's economic modernization goals. Viewed in this light, SALT was and remains inimical to the PRC's national interests. China's desire to build an anti-Soviet united front also found expression in its opposition to SALT II in the late 1970s. The adverse tide of Soviet military ascendancy was seen as being furthered by SALT II, and the Chinese repeatedly expressed their concerns to Washington and Western Europe.<sup>28</sup>

#### COMPETITION WITH THE SUPERPOWERS: THE 1980s

During the 1980s, China has continued to alter its arms control and disarmament policies as it redefines its national objectives. The PRC has begun to articulate more precise arms control positions consonant with its military interests. In addition, it seems more willing to accommodate prevailing Second and Third World attitudes toward arms control and disarmament. The PRC's more specific approach was evident in its proposal for disarmament delivered to the UN General Assembly in June 1982. While predictably calling on the superpowers to take the lead in world arms control and disarmament by reducing their conventional and nuclear arsenals, the PRC also suggested that "disarmament measures should be carried out without prejudice or threat to the independence, sovereignty and security of any state."<sup>29</sup> The Chinese were evidently concerned that the United States, in its efforts to strike an arms accord at Geneva, might agree to Soviet redeployment of its SS-20 theater nuclear weapons from Europe to Asia. While remaining unimpressed by superpower arms control efforts in general, China felt directly the potential threat to its security posed by the SS-20s and amended its arms control policy accordingly.<sup>30</sup>

Beijing also offered a quantifiable, if still vague, proposal, calling on the superpowers to cease all nuclear testing and weapon development, and to reduce their

existing arsenals by 50 percent.<sup>31</sup> By advancing a more specific position, China indicated a greater desire to become a participant in the global arms control process, if only by attempting to convince others that its approach is a pragmatic one. Nevertheless, its arms control posture remains supportive of its goal to enhance its military security. China belatedly signed the Outer Space Treaty in 1983 at the very time when it appeared the Soviet Union and United States were on the verge of embarking on an arms race in space. As stated earlier, the PRC obviously seeks to discourage the superpowers from attaining the capacity to threaten its second-strike force and viewed the treaty as being in its best interests. Beijing, cognizant of its strategic weakness, continues to call for a no-first-use pledge from the nuclear powers. It also makes every effort to point out that its own nuclear weapon program remains defensive and is merely a response to the superpowers' own arms race. The Foreign Minister, Wu Xueqian, stated in September 1985 that "the few nuclear weapons China has and the limited number of nuclear tests it has conducted are solely for the purpose of self-defense."<sup>32</sup> The PRC senses the need to rationalize its strategic arms program to the world community, but it also seeks to preempt any efforts in Washington and Moscow to brand Beijing's actions as destabilizing.

China has become more adroit in recent years in gaining propaganda points and enhancing its international image by remaining sensitive to Second and Third World attitudes toward arms control and disarmament. The PRC, which stresses the direct relationship between nuclear and conventional armaments, promoted its recent elimination of one million soldiers from the ranks of the PLA as a major contribution to world peace.<sup>33</sup> The dramatic manpower cut-back, which had been justified domestically primarily on the grounds of increasing the PLA's efficiency, was effectively used by Beijing in world forums as a sign of the PRC's sincerity regarding arms control. Another indicator of China's increasing attention to world opinion has been the

changing tone of its commentaries on American-Soviet arms control talks. As previously mentioned, throughout the 1970s China viewed SALT with contempt. By 1985, however, although China was decidedly pessimistic over the prospects of START,<sup>34</sup> it nevertheless noted that the resumption of the American-Soviet dialogue in Geneva conformed to the "world's wish for disarmament and peace."<sup>35</sup> Beijing's decision not to reject categorically the Geneva process indicates the importance it places on not being viewed as obstructing this wish.

China has also displayed deftness in ensuring that its arms control policies do not impinge upon its economic objectives. The PRC has aggressively pursued an atomic energy program since the late 1970s as part of its modernization program. Its unwillingness to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty has presented obstacles to its acquisition of technology from the West. It has responded by joining the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1983, stating that it would adopt IAEA safeguards for its export of nuclear material and equipment, and offering assurances that its imports of nuclear fuels and equipment would be strictly for peaceful purposes.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Chinese leaders have gone out of their way to assuage American fears in particular that it does not promote proliferation.<sup>37</sup> While China as a matter of principle remains opposed to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, economic as well as security interests drive China to honor the spirit of the treaty.

Yet China clearly seeks to counter the American-Soviet nuclear arms race with more than words. The PRC currently has approximately 116 strategic missiles<sup>38</sup> and the US Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that China is currently producing around 40 missiles per year.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese High Command has proclaimed that it has achieved a credible second-strike force.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the Chinese navy has initiated a ballistic missile submarine construction program.<sup>41</sup> PLA leaders have emphasized that nuclear weapons are vital to the security of the homeland and that China will continue to add to its strategic arsenal.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the

PRC entertains great-power aspirations and views strategic nuclear forces as a prerequisite to superpower status.<sup>43</sup> While it would be premature to argue that there is at present a role for China in US-Soviet arms control negotiations, it is certain that the PRC's strategic nuclear forces will increasingly influence the arms control and disarmament policies of Washington and Moscow.<sup>44</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The issues raised in this article deserve more scrutiny if the United States is correctly to anticipate Beijing's future approach toward arms control and disarmament; however, some tentative conclusions can be offered. First, the factors that have shaped and will continue to shape China's arms control policies do not differ markedly from those that influence the superpowers' policies. Although Beijing calls its policies principled and unchanging, it is the imperatives of China's national objectives which determine specific attitudes toward arms control and disarmament. As these national objectives undergo change, the substance, if not necessarily the form, of Beijing's policies will likewise change. Second, the PRC's definition of the strategic threat and the PRC's capabilities against the superpowers will affect China's policies. The Chinese are driven by a desire to achieve a credible second-strike capability. Any superpower initiatives which threaten this objective, such as the Strategic Defense Initiative, or arms control proposals which do not enhance this objective, such as the emphasis that SALT and START have placed on quantitative as opposed to qualitative limitations, will meet with PRC opposition. Furthermore, given the nature of the Soviet threat, the PRC's position that nuclear and conventional arms control are related issues will continue as long as China is deficient in both areas. This may complicate arms control negotiations, but perhaps it is advantageous to the West, given NATO's own conventional inferiority to the USSR.

Finally, China will continue to attempt to improve its status within the global

community by portraying itself both as the underdog champion of the Third World and as a responsible major power in the international order. This will make Beijing susceptible to world pressure to participate in arms control and disarmament dialogues or to accept agreements that are contrary to its "principled stands"; at the same time, Beijing can be expected to refine its own positioning regarding arms controls, offering quantifiable programs in its efforts to wrest the initiative from Washington and Moscow in the struggle for international support.

### NOTES

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