

# GERMAN AND CHINESE COOPERATION IN MULTILATERAL ARMS CONTROL

## Objectives and Formats of a Potential Dialogue

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In multilateral arms control, Germany and China are pursuing the **same objectives** on important issues. Both countries advocate in principle for the preservation of multilateral treaties and instruments, and there is a shared interest in reducing threats to humanity and strengthening regional stability through international cooperation.<sup>1</sup> The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) are all important accords supported by both Beijing and Berlin, even if the goals and interests behind that support may differ.

Germany and China are also committed to maintaining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) aimed at verified controls of the Iranian nuclear program and the development of trust in the peaceful intentions behind that program. Against the background of the war in the Middle East, however, the opportunities for the U.S. to save the JCPOA have been further reduced. As such, the responsibility of other countries participating in this agreement to work against the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East has increased accordingly.

These similarities, however, cannot conceal the fact that there are **differences** between Beijing and Berlin when it comes to arms control policies. Germany is concerned about the implications of the Chinese nuclear arms buildup. From the German point of view, greater transparency about the scope and objectives of the growing Chinese deterrence potential is necessary to reduce the risk of nuclear arms races and to comply with NPT obligations.

Germany sees nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament as global public good to a greater degree than China does. Germany is a state party to important arms control treaties like the ban on landmines codified in the Ottawa Convention and

the prohibition of cluster munitions contained in the Oslo Process. China has thus far not joined these treaties.

Furthermore, on certain issues it remains **unclear just how broad the congruence** is between German and Chinese arms policies. Different conceptions of international roles, historical experiences, regional contexts and geopolitical aims mean that while Germany's and China's arms control policy goals may appear superficially similar, they may diverge in practice.

Since the mid-1980s, China has become increasingly involved in multilateral arms control. Broad assertions that China does not participate in arms control are at best true for efforts to establish limits for nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, Beijing is ambivalent about its role in multilateral arms control. On the one hand, Beijing acts as a major power, particularly among permanent members of the UN Security Council, but on the other, Beijing repeatedly claims to still be a developing country whose priorities lie in economic developing. This shifting interpretation of its international role makes it easy for China, depending on its interests, to reject demands to become more involved in enforcing global norms.

Germany promotes norms and guidelines for responsible behavior also in areas where intergovernmental agreements are not sufficient for effective regulation. From Germany's perspective, responsible cyberspace governance and cooperation in space exploration are among the issues where private and civil society actors must be involved in arms control policy efforts. China has thus far viewed such "governance" approaches with scepticism. At the same time, however, Beijing would like to be involved in establishing regulations in those areas where it has important economic interests, such as in outer space.

### ARMS CONTROL REMAINS A VITAL PILLAR OF THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The Sino-American summit between President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden in mid-November 2023 in San Fran-

<sup>1</sup> Meier, Oliver / Staack, Michael (2022): "Chinas Rolle in der multilateralen Rüstungskontrolle", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/19346.pdf>.

cisco may not have produced a breakthrough on arms control, but it did at least open a few military communications channels between the two countries.<sup>2</sup> From Beijing's perspective, the issues of outer space, cyberspace and artificial intelligence are on the agenda of talks between American and Chinese experts. Consequently, China's interest in discussions with Europeans on those issues has grown. Beijing has apparently understood that it will be difficult in the future to limit intergovernmental discussions with European partners to economic issues: Foreign and security policy will also have to become part of the agenda dialogue issues.

Arms control remains a vital pillar of the international order in the interests of all. Arms control measures increase the predictability between the actors involved, and continuous communication, particularly between the U.S. and China, is indispensable for understanding the views of the other side. It contributes to building trust and helps contain crises. Because of its vital role in global order arms control plays, progress on arms control must not be made dependent on the resolution of other issues. However, a minimum level of mutual willingness to respect the core interests of the other side is a precondition for arms control to be successful.

## CHINA'S IMPORTANCE FOR MULTILATERAL ARMS CONTROL IS GROWING

Without China, the preservation and, especially, the strengthening of multilateral arms control is hardly possible. China's military strength and defense buildup, its economic weight and its political influence make its involvement in international arms efforts indispensable. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China also bears responsibility for the enforcement of important arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation standards and rules.

Because Beijing remains Moscow's most important foreign and security policy partner, China's responsibility for the preservation and further development of important arms control instruments has grown. Since at least the end of 2022, Russia has been blocking all multilateral arms control forums in an effort to reduce Western support for Ukraine. Moscow also wants to demonstrate its obstructionist power. In doing so, Russia is accepting the possibility that important multilateral agreements might fail. Russia's abuse of the consensus principle and of procedural rules is inflicting lasting damage to multilateral arms control efforts.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked a turning point for Germany's in foreign and security policy and has had dramatic consequences for arms control in Europe. Central agreements for European security, such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), the

Treaty on Open Skies and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), are now history or only continue to exist on paper. The New START agreement also hangs by a thread following Russia's suspension of the accord.

China's support for Russia's approach to multilateral arms control is limited at best. At the head-of-state and head-of-government levels, China and Russia may profess their "limitless partnership." Beijing and Moscow continue to share the interest that arms control should not stand in the way of armaments programs in which they are in direct competition with the U.S. Still, in Beijing, the cooperation is seen more as a "marriage of convenience" rooted in the fact that both countries are engaged in competition with the West and especially with the U.S., but otherwise pursue different aims and interests.

China has no interest in the collapse of multilateral arms control regimes. Just like Western states, China is increasingly using these instruments to pursue its own interests and limit threats to regional and global security.

Since February 2022, the differences between Russia's blockade approach and China's position on important multilateral regimes have become clearer. In August 2022, China (unsuccessfully) urged Russia to prevent the collapse of the 10th NPT Review Conference, because the draft final document contained important Chinese goals and formulations.<sup>3</sup>

Beijing's repeated warnings to Moscow to refrain from using nuclear weapons in the war against Ukraine are also important. The joint warning by the German and Chinese heads of state and government against a nuclear escalation in the war against Ukraine in early November 2022 was issued after U.S. intelligence services had obtained concrete evidence that the risk of Russia using nuclear weapons had risen to 50 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, Beijing's efforts at advancing the Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament Initiative (CEND), which focuses on issues of nuclear risk reduction, are notable. Even though Russia withdrew from the initiative in autumn 2022, China remains active and has been able to mediate between countries of the Global South and the North.

China did not voice criticism of Russia's de-ratification of the CTBT, but it likely has an interest in the preservation of the moratorium on nuclear tests. North Korea's nuclear test site, for example, is located in direct proximity to the Chinese-North Korean border. At the same time, there are indications that China has made preparations to carry out nucle-

<sup>2</sup> Nakamura, Ryo / Moriyasu, Ken (2023): "U.S. and China to resume staff-level military dialogue in January", in: *Nikkei Asia*, 31 December 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/U.S.-and-China-to-resume-staff-level-military-dialogue-in-January>.

<sup>3</sup> Baldus, Jana / Meier, Oliver (2022): "Scheitern mit Ansage", in: *Vereinte Nationen* 70, Nr. 6 (December 2022), S. 266–271, <https://doi.org/10.35998/VN-2022-0030>.

<sup>4</sup> The Federal Government (2022): "Federal Chancellor Scholz on his inaugural visit to China", 4 November 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/federal-chancellor-in-china-2140012>; Center for International Security and Cooperation (2023): *The Stability-Instability Paradox: Managing Nuclear Escalation Risks in Ukraine*, Stanford, CA, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OsTLN7A1sw>.

ar tests of its own should other nuclear-armed countries bring the test moratorium to an end.<sup>5</sup>

Russia's stationing of nuclear weapons in Belarus, as announced by Moscow, increases the danger that NATO will also expand its nuclear weapons posture to other countries.<sup>6</sup> That, however, at odds with the Chinese position according to which nuclear weapons should only be stationed on the territory of the country that owns them. China has, however, toned down the position it had previously espoused together with Russia that all nuclear weapon states should generally end nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>7</sup> Because Russia, citing NATO's deployment practices, wants to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus as a form of nuclear sharing, China is now criticising the stationing of such weapons "overseas," primarily a reference to the possible deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>8</sup>

China has been involved in biosecurity efforts for many years. The growing global influence of Chinese biotechnology companies, which are currently in the process of challenging U.S. dominance, makes this commitment increasingly significant. Given the ongoing culture of non-transparency in China, this interest in international rules and norms in the area of biosecurity is rather complex.<sup>9</sup> That makes it all the more noteworthy that China, in cooperation with several countries, including support from important Western states, introduced the "Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines" at the 9th Review Conference of the BWC in December 2022, an initiative that ultimately fell victim to Russian machinations. It is currently unclear whether and how China intends to pursue this initiative.

At the same time, China continues to support groundless Russian claims that laboratories in Ukraine are working on developing biological weapons with the help of Western countries. In addition, Moscow and Beijing are jointly op-

posing the strengthening of competencies of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) which would enable the identification of those responsible chemical weapons attacks.

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## HURDLES TO AN ARMS CONTROL DIALOGUE WITH CHINA

Economic competition can doubtlessly impede a dialogue with China on arms control issues. The U.S. has imposed restrictions on trade with China for a number of dual-use technologies that Washington believes to be security relevant. Beijing has sharply criticised the measures because it believes that Washington is seeking to curb China's economic development under the cover of non-proliferation. The EU has thus far only joined the U.S. measures in a few specific sectors but has not excluded the possibility of imposing broader technology restrictions in the future.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there is a long-term threat of secondary sanctions being imposed by the U.S. on China, particularly should a Republican candidate win the upcoming U.S. presidential election.

China is likely to push Germany and the EU to take a clearer stance in opposition to strategic technology and trade controls. Beijing is likely to raise this issue within the framework of multilateral non-proliferation and disarmament regimes, since these should in principle also promote cooperation in the peaceful use of such technologies.

Germany is deeply concerned about Russian violations of the CWC and false Russian accusations that laboratories in Ukraine and other Eastern European and Central Asian states are working on the development of biological weapons (also with German support). Russia's lack of transparency related to assassination attempts using chemical weapons against Russian citizens and false accusations of treaty violations undermine important norms against chemical and biological weapons. From the German perspective, a strengthening of the OPCW is vital so that it can independently identify and investigate those responsible for such treaty violations. This could also contribute to the closer integration of disarmament law and criminal law.

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## ISSUES AND APPROACHES FOR AN ARMS CONTROL DIALOGUE WITH RUSSIA

An arms control policy dialogue between Germany and China at the government level should address commonalities and differences openly, constructively and on an issue-specific basis. An official dialogue with China on these and other issues can build on existing contacts. Most recently, arms control policy talks took place in early July 2023 between Günter Sautter, Germany's commissioner for disarmament

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5 Broad, William J. / Buckley, Chris / Corum, Jonathan (2023): "China Quietly Rebuilds Secretive Base for Nuclear Tests", in: *The New York Times*, 20 December 2023 (modified: 9 January 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/20/science/china-nuclear-tests-lop-nur.html>.

6 Kacprzyk, Artur (2023): "NATO Nuclear Adaptation: Rationales for Expanding the Force Posture in Europe", The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw, [https://www.pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20NATO%20Nuclear%20Adaptation\\_END.pdf](https://www.pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20NATO%20Nuclear%20Adaptation_END.pdf).

7 Fu, Cong (2022): "Remarks by H. E. Ambassador Fu Cong, Head of the Chinese Delegation and Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China at the 10th Review Conference of the Parties to the NPT", New York, 2 August 2022.

8 Sun, Xiaobo (2023): "Statement by Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry of China Sun Xiaobo at the General Debate of the First Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference", August 2023.

9 Kelle, Alexander / Siegmann, Eva (2023): "Great Powers and the Norms of the BW Prohibition Regime", CBWNet Working Paper, December 2023, Hamburg, <https://cbwnet.org/news/out-now-cbwnet-working-paper-on-great-powers-and-the-norms-of-the-bw-prohibition-regime>.

10 Hanke Vela, Jakob (2023): "The 4 Technologies Europe Wants to Keep Safe from China", in: *Político*, 3 October 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/the-4-technologies-europe-wants-to-keep-safe-from-china/>.

and arms control, and his Chinese counterpart Sun Xiaobo.<sup>11</sup> There are also working-level channels of communication between NATO and China. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has emphasised that both the alliance as a whole and individual NATO member states are prepared to engage in talks with China on arms control issues.<sup>12</sup>

It seems likely, however, that a “bottom-up” dialogue starting at the expert level and slowly becoming more ambitious will ultimately prove to be more promising. As a first step, an arms control policy dialogue with China could seek to explore concrete possibilities for German-Chinese cooperation. The inclusion of Chinese expertise in discussions on the verification of nuclear disarmament would be an important contribution to talks in the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV), from which China withdrew in 2017.<sup>13</sup>

Specificity, flexibility and the willingness to engage in dialogue could increase the likelihood of success in efforts to establish an arms control policy dialogue with China. Discussions on technical issues are a good starting point, also because Chinese participants generally need a political mandate to participate. In addition, such dialogues should be pursued with a long-term perspective and aimed at building trust among the participants.

Established think tanks, which have long engaged in institutionalised partnerships with German institutes and political foundations, should be seen as important points of contact. Furthermore, a number of new think tanks have recently been established in China that could also be potential interlocutors. While these institutes are not independent in the traditional sense, they are far from representing a uniform position and they bring different perspectives and areas of expertise to the arms control policy debate.

Chinese experts emphasise that the noticeable nuclear weapons build-up, despite the impossibility of clearly determining the extent of that expansion, does not represent a departure from China’s no-first-use doctrine or from minimal deterrence. This, however, is not self-evident and should be explored through appropriate steps in a trust-building manner. Moreover, in light of the important issue of nuclear transparency, there should be some pushback against it is essential to engage critically with the Chinese argument that more openness would undermine China’s nuclear second-strike capability. It is important here to clarify what transparency steps would be possible short of a disclosure of warhead

numbers and deployment sites. Germany could, for example, work with NATO and EU partners to describe possible transparency measures.

China already participates in discussions on nuclear risk reduction within the framework of CEND. Building on that engagement, these questions could also become part of a dialogue on arms control policy with NATO. The dialogue on norms and rules for responsible cyberspace governance and for cooperation in outer space could continue as part of the China-EU dialogue.

Germany is also interested in reducing risks at the intersection of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT) and nuclear weapons. Through the Stockholm Initiative and the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI), Germany is engaging the five permanent Security Council members (P5) in discussion over these and other issues of nuclear risk reduction.

Whether this exchange will continue during the Russian chairmanship of the P5 is questionable. Nevertheless, these contacts should be intensified under China’s chairmanship, which begins in August 2025.

China is currently the only participants of the E3/EU+3 that is still implementing the provisions of the JCPOA. It clearly has no interest in a further military escalation in the Middle East, whereas Russia is taking advantage of the situation in order to put Israel’s supporters on the defensive. A German-Chinese dialogue could thus also discuss whether the E3/EU together with China could present proposals for defusing the conflict surrounding the Iranian nuclear program.

Germany supported the guidelines for biosecurity (Tianjin), which were largely developed by China, and regrets that they fell victim to Russian obstruction at the 9th BWC Review Conference in December 2022. Germany and China could work together more closely on the implementation of positive arms control obligations, for example on programs for biosecurity and the prevention of misuse of chemical substances by non-state actors.

Germany would welcome China’s active involvement in other instruments aimed at humanitarian arms control beyond the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Here, Germany could offer to participate in or support the implementation of positive commitments in the area of humanitarian arms control, such as mine clearance or small arms control.

Civil society contacts are a sensible – and, in some cases, necessary – complement to official discussion channels. From the German perspective, the unrestricted participation of such civil society organisations in multilateral forums is important to benefit from their expertise and to expand the legitimacy of arms control treaties through their involvement. China, however, remains sceptical or even dismissive of such groups. Track 2.0 and Track 1.5 dialogues could contribute to a reduction in reservations and encourage China to accept the inclusion of expertise from non-governmental organisations.

<sup>11</sup> Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Montenegro (2023): “China and Germany Hold Consultations on Arms Control and Non-proliferation”, 3 July 2023, [http://me.china-embassy.gov.cn/mon/wjbxw/202307/t20230719\\_11115075.htm](http://me.china-embassy.gov.cn/mon/wjbxw/202307/t20230719_11115075.htm).

<sup>12</sup> NATO (2023): “Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the 18th Annual NATO Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament and Weapons of Mass Destruction Non-Proliferation”, 18 April 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_213952.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_213952.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Zhao, Tong (2022): “China’s Approach to Arms Control Verification”, Sandia Report, 1 March 2022, Albuquerque, <https://t.co/C0IUNfeRnn>.

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