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# Focused Multilateralism: How China and Germany can better engage on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation

## Summary

- Even in times of increased competition between China, Russia and the United States, Europeans have agency when it comes to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Europeans will need to up their level of ambition in pursuing their own interests in making multilateral instruments more resilient.
- China as a nuclear weapon state and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council bears a special responsibility to uphold the international order, including in the field of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. China will need to begin closing the gap between its stated ambitions to support multilateralism with its often overly passive policies.
- The economic competition between the West and China is casting a long shadow over attempts by Europe and China to engage on ADN. To the degree possible, both sides should try to separate economic and security issues.
- Europeans should adopt a nuanced approach toward transparency vis-à-vis China, engaging China in discussions about the generic value of openness for crisis and arms race stability. China for its part should be open to calls by Europeans and other states to explain the rationale for its nuclear policies above.
- Europe and China should explore options to strengthen the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), including by discussing technical options to improve international trust and confidence that activities at nuclear test sites are peaceful.

- China and Germany share concerns around the dangers resulting from weaponisation of peaceful nuclear facilities in conflict zones. They could take joint initiatives to better protect nuclear facilities in zones of conflict and war.
- Berlin and Beijing want to avoid escalation of regional proliferation crises, including in Iran and North Korea, and could cooperate more closely in trying to find diplomatic solutions to such problems.
- It is in Germany's and Europe's interest to draw Beijing closer to humanitarian arms control, and recent violations of International Humanitarian Law may provide opportunities to engage China.

## How to (not) engage with China on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation

Engaging China on multilateral arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation (ADN) has become more urgent, but also more difficult. Security in Europe and the Asia-Pacific is increasingly interconnected. Russia has decided to obstruct arms control, and is blocking progress in multilateral and bilateral forums in an attempt to reduce international support for Ukraine. The Trump administration, with its nationalist-populist outlook, will likely wreak further damage on the international order. All of these developments put the spotlight on China's role in international security, including ADN.

China is building up, modernising and diversifying its nuclear arsenal at an unprecedented speed. Europeans are worried about the nuclear build-up for a number of reasons, including the so-called three-body problem, i.e. the spectre of a three-way arms race between China, Russia and the United States that will be difficult to constrain through traditional bilateral arms control approaches. Europeans fear that such unchecked nuclear competition could increase proliferation pressures in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. China's refusal to be more transparent and provide better accountability in the context of the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) complicate European efforts to strengthen the non-proliferation regime more generally. Given the first Trump administration's provocative, flippant – and unsuccessful – approach of trying to pressure Beijing to the arms control table, little progress can be expected over the next four years, even if President Trump showed an awareness of the problem when addressing the World Economic Forum in January 2025.<sup>1</sup>

Beijing has a greater responsibility for global arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation not only by default, because the two largest nuclear powers have shunned

multilateralism. China itself has become a major player on many issues because of its military strength, economic power and political influence. Since the mid-1980s, China has gradually become more involved in multilateral arms control agreements. The general statement that China does not participate in arms control is only true when it comes to limiting nuclear potential.

Beijing's movement towards the arms control and disarmament mainstream has not been without setbacks. China is ambivalent about the role it wants to play in multilateral arms control. On the one hand, Beijing wants to act as a great power, especially among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. On the other hand, Beijing likes to portray itself as a developing country, whose priorities lie in economic development. This conveniently ambivalent self-description makes it easier for China to reject calls to assume greater responsibility for upholding and enforcing global norms. At the same time, Beijing is bracing for the impact of the Trump administration on Sino-US relations and, more generally, the global order.

Meanwhile, Europe, and Germany in particular, remain committed to upholding and strengthening multilateral efforts to control and reduce weapons of mass destruction and to reduce the risks of military misuse of relevant dual-use technologies. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and associated nuclear threats have elevated the importance of nuclear risk reduction for Europeans. Europe, once an arms control showcase, has become a nuclear hotspot. From this perspective, successful engagement of China on ADN could offer an opportunity for Europeans to find ways to reduce the risk of unnecessary military competition and to stem proliferation.

It has been difficult for China and Europeans to identify shared ADN interests and ways of engaging each other. Despite its general support for multilateral arms control, China does not act as an agenda-setting global power. Beijing is reluctant to acknowledge and act upon its greater responsibility for international peace and security. It is not ready to constrain those military capabilities it sees as necessary to compete with the United States. Beijing is wary of governance approaches that in Beijing's view amount to, or could amount to, "interference in internal affairs". Its strategic partnership with Russia sometimes binds it to Moscow's harmful arms control policies.

Engagement of Europeans has been hindered by the continent's internal and political fragmentation. Generally speaking, the EU has reduced its level of ambition to work toward an "effective multilateralism". Germany's perception of China is ambiguous. Like other Europeans, Berlin sees

<sup>1</sup> In his remarks to the World Economic Forum delivered on 23 January, President Trump said that he would "like to see denucleariation". Trump said that Russian President Putin "really liked the idea of cutting way back on nuclear" and that "the rest of the world, we would have gotten them to follow, and China would have come along too." "Trump Says He's Ready to Meet Putin 'immediately' to Secure End of Ukraine War", Reuters, 23 January, 2025, sec. World. <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-says-he-wants-meet-putin-soon-ensure-end-ukraine-war-2025-01-23/>.

China simultaneously as “a partner, competitor and systemic rival”<sup>2</sup>. This lack of clarity surrounding the nature of Sino-European relations makes it difficult to compartmentalise engagement on arms control from the overall relationship. Radical shifts of U.S. foreign and security policies over the last 30 years have additionally complicated attempts for Europeans and China to develop a meaningful arms control agenda and find the right formats for an arms control dialogue between them. The second Trump administration is certain to add another chapter to this difficult story.

Against such a complex background, this paper maps areas of possible engagement between Germany, Europe and China on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, ranging from difficult to more promising topics for engagement. Because Germany almost always pursues its arms control, disarmament and arms control policies through the EU or NATO, this paper charts the feasibility and desirability of engagement with China for Europe more broadly.

While this analysis is broad, it is also subjective and selective. It builds on and updates two previous, more comprehensive analyses by the authors, and is informed by two week-long visits by German arms control experts to Beijing in November/December 2023 and December 2024.<sup>3</sup> This paper confirms previous findings that specificity, flexibility and willingness to engage in dialogue can enhance the chances of success of a dialogue on arms control between Europeans and China.<sup>4</sup> Rather than making sweeping demands of China, Europeans should seek a focused multilateral approach, separating security from economic competition wherever possible.

China for its part needs to further distance itself from irresponsible Russian policies and must be ready to independently explore areas of engagement with Europeans. It should be willing to discuss even those issues it feels less confident about. Such engagement should be undertaken with a view to learning from each other. While this analysis supports long-term engagement between Europe and China on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, both sides should acknowledge that to wait for the current turmoil in international relations to subside is no option. The current international environment is too dangerous, the stakes are too high and the demise of international institutions is happening too rapidly to wait things out before the next steps are taken on arms control.

## Sour grapes: Geopolitics and nuclear competition

China and the United States see their security policies increasingly through the lens of bilateral rivalry. China does not want arms control agreements to impose constraints on its arms policy, at least not as long as the U.S. is not subject to similar restrictions.<sup>5</sup> This makes Sino-European engagement on arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation difficult if it addresses military capabilities that Beijing sees as essential for its competition with Washington.

China’s reluctance to engage on nuclear arms control is a case in point. The U.S. Department of Defense assumes that China now has more than 600 nuclear weapons. Washington forecasts that by 2030 it will have more than 1,000 operational warheads and will continue to grow its arsenal over the medium term.<sup>6</sup> China refuses to officially acknowledge its nuclear build-up, let alone explain its rationale or goals to Europeans and the rest of the international community.<sup>7</sup> Many European and Chinese observers agree that Beijing’s arms build-up is a function of the security dilemma it faces in its relationship with the USA, which is likely to worsen under the second Trump administration. The aim of a nuclear build-up would then be driven by the goal to maintain a credible second-strike capability. The construction of new silos could thus make target-planning on the U.S. side more difficult.

Europeans, while flagging their concern about Chinese (and other nuclear weapon states’) opacity should choose a more nuanced and productive approach toward transparency. Thus, they could engage Chinese experts in conversations about the generic value of openness when it comes to crises and arms race stability. China for its part should be open to calls by Europeans and other states to explain the rationale for its nuclear policies beyond the well-known statements on a minimum deterrent. Beijing should acknowledge that it can provide useful transparency short of disclosing numbers or locations of nuclear weapons.

In addition to the nuclear arms race between China and the United States, the economic competition between the West and China is casting a long shadow over attempts to engage on ADN. Europe and China are struggling to separate economic and security issues, while the United States has been ramping up trade restrictions on Beijing. The

2 Federal Government of the Republic of Germany. “Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany.” Berlin, 2023, p. 8.

3 Meier, Oliver, and Michael Staack. “China’s Role in Multilateral Arms Control.” Bonn, 1 June 2022. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/19484.pdf>; Staack, Michael, and Oliver Meier. “German and Chinese Cooperation in Multilateral Arms Control.” FES Policy Brief. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024. <https://www.fes.de/en/themenportal-wirtschaft-finanzen-oekologie-soziales/article-page/germany-and-china-in-multilateral-arms-control>.

4 Meier, Oliver, and Michael Staack. “China’s Role in Multilateral Arms Control,” op.cit., p. 24.

5 Meier, Oliver, and Michael Staack. “China’s Role in Multilateral Arms Control,” op.cit, pp. 13ff.

6 U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2024.” Annual Report to Congress. Washington, D.C., 2024. <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>, p. IX.

7 Zhao, Tong. “Political Drivers of China’s Changing Nuclear Policy: Implications for U.S.-China Nuclear Relations and International Security.” Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024.

Trump administration has imposed high tariffs on Chinese imports. Washington may attempt to force Europeans to fall in line by imposing secondary sanctions on Europeans maintaining trade ties with China. During the Trump administration, Europeans may have to make difficult choices such as either imposing restrictions on trade with China or risking conflict with Washington.

To complicate things further, China's criticism of multilateral export controls is at odds with Europe's support for such non-proliferation instruments. Beijing participates in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, but not in any other export control regime. More recently, China has been actively echoing and reinforcing criticism of some Global South countries that multilateral export control arrangements are discriminatory. Thus, Beijing has revised and sharpened a United Nations General Assembly resolution on "Promoting international cooperation on peaceful uses in the context of international security". This resolution has attracted broader support from Global South countries which are concerned about access to dual-use technologies for peaceful development.<sup>8</sup> Together with Russia, it has also taken a principled stance against sanctions.

These positions are at odds with German and European policies, which support multilateral export controls and are increasingly resorting to restrictive trade measures to prevent the spread of military and dual-use technologies. From Europe's perspective, the Chinese initiatives are polarising and undermine efforts to prevent the spread and misuse of dual-use technologies. It will be difficult for both sides to disentangle these issues as long as they are seen also as a way to garner international support, either from the Global South or from the United States.

### High-hanging fruit: Shared concerns, but different interests

Moscow's decision to block any agreement in multilateral forums has shaken the arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation architecture. Russia's obstructionism has made it clearer that the preservation and strengthening of multilateral arms control is hardly possible without Beijing. China's military strength and defence build-up, its economic weight and its political influence make its involvement in and support of international arms efforts indispensable, particularly as Moscow and Washington are moving further away from multilateralism.

From a European perspective, it would be important for China to distance itself from Russian obstructionism on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. The bad

news is: Beijing and Moscow agree that arms control must not stand in the way of those weapons programmes they believe are important for competing directly or asymmetrically with the United States. The Russian and Chinese Presidents are united in their opposition of the West. This rejection of "the West" extends to institutions associated with a "liberal international order", often also including those aimed at restricting weapons and dual-use technologies.

The good news: So far China's support for Russia's misuse of multilateral arms control as a lever to reduce Western support for Ukraine is limited. At the head-of-state level, China and Russia may profess their "limitless partnership." Yet, among experts and at the working level, many in Beijing see the cooperation with Russia as a mere "marriage of convenience" and acknowledge that on certain issues China and Russia pursue different aims and interests.<sup>9</sup> It remains to be seen what effects the bromance between the Russian and U.S. Presidents will have on the Chinese-Russian partnership, including on ADN.

Thus, Chinese experts are concerned about Russia's new nuclear doctrine, which they see as lowering the threshold for use of nuclear weapons by Moscow. They compare Russian nuclear policies to the 2024 U.S. Nuclear Employment Guidance, both of which they see as increasing the role of nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup> This increased salience of nuclear weapons in Russian and U.S. military and security concepts, doctrines and policies is viewed as being at odds with Beijing's doctrine of no-first-use of nuclear weapons and minimum deterrence. Chinese experts steadfastly maintain that Beijing's nuclear build-up does not imply a departure from such principles.

Europeans are criticising China's reluctance to spell out how its no-first-use policy can be squared with the observable build-up, modernisation and diversification of Beijing's nuclear forces. They argue that Beijing should explicate its nuclear doctrine through appropriate steps in order to build trust. It is important to note that the credibility of China's nuclear doctrine could also be questioned by the Global South if such transparency is not provided.

Europe and China are concerned about Russian nuclear threats and the possibility that Moscow may use nuclear weapons in the context of its war against Ukraine. The joint warning by the German and Chinese heads of state and government about a nuclear escalation in the war against Ukraine in early November 2022 was issued after U.S. intelligence services had concrete indications that the risk of Russia using nuclear weapons had risen to 50 percent. Europeans acknowledge the importance of

<sup>8</sup> Brockmann, Kolja, Mark Bromley, and Giovanna Maletta. "Implications of the UN Resolutions on 'International Cooperation on Peaceful Uses': Balancing Non-Proliferation and Economic Development", SIPRI, Stockholm, 11 December 2024. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2024/implications-un-resolutions-international-cooperation-peaceful-uses-balancing-non-proliferation-and>.

<sup>9</sup> Staack, Michael, and Oliver Meier. "German and Chinese Cooperation in Multilateral Arms Control", op.cit., p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Federation of American Scientists. "Biden Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance Leaves Nuclear Decisions to Trump," 5 December 2024. <https://fas.org/publication/biden-nuclear-weapons-employment-guidance-leaves-nuclear-decisions-to-trump/>.

Beijing's repeated warnings to Moscow to refrain from using nuclear weapons in the war against Ukraine, while Germany welcomed "China's assertion that a nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought."<sup>11</sup>

Beijing is chairing the P5, or more precisely the N5, the group of nuclear weapon states recognised under the NPT, until summer 2025. After a lengthy lull under the previous Russian chairmanship, the N5 met on 4 December 2024 to conduct "candid discussions" on nuclear doctrines.<sup>12</sup> From a European point of view, it is positive that the P5 at the working level have put nuclear doctrines on the agenda. France and the UK, which also have comparatively small nuclear arsenals, may face some of the same transparency dilemmas China is presumably grappling with. China may also be interested in engaging in a conversation on Failsafe reviews to comprehensively assess the safety and security of nuclear arsenals.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, from a European perspective, it would be useful for China and the P5 to debrief non-nuclear weapon states. on these discussions, for example in the framework of engagement of the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament that was initiated by Germany and Sweden in 2019 with the P5.

China has recently put forward a specific initiative to operationalise its long-standing position on a no-first-use of nuclear weapons. Beijing proposes that the five nuclear-weapon states "negotiate and conclude a treaty on 'mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons' or issue a political statement in this regard."<sup>14</sup> China should be open to discussing such issues not only with nuclear weapon state peers, but also interested non-nuclear weapon states, particularly if they are allied with nuclear weapon states.

Against the background of Russia's aggressive nuclear policies, Europeans are interested in gaining traction with their nuclear risk reduction efforts. The Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative is the only like-minded group with a nuclear focus Germany and China are engaged in. In June 2024, CEND published a compendium of nuclear risk-reduction measures.<sup>15</sup> Chinese participation was active and is noteworthy also because Russia has decided to withdraw from participation in the initiative. CEND, which has about 40 participating

countries, could thus be a place to explore and move nuclear risk-reduction efforts forward.

Europe and China should also explore options to strengthen the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). There are concerns about China increasing the readiness of its nuclear test site, while Beijing itself is proud of its cooperation with the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban-Treaty Organisation.<sup>16</sup> Europe and China could jointly, for example, explore technical options to boost international confidence in activities at nuclear test sites being CTBT-compliant.

Options for focused engagement may also exist outside the nuclear file, for example in the area of chemical weapons. So far China has sided with Russia and a few other states in blocking efforts to modernise the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Beijing opposes mechanisms to improve accountability for chemical weapons attacks, including efforts to identify the perpetrators of chemical weapons use in Syria and elsewhere. Some of these efforts have also been looking into Russia's responsibility for the use of chemical weapons against political opponents and in Ukraine.

The fall of the Assad regime may provide opportunities to work with China on chemical weapons-control issues. Between 2015 and 2017 China actively supported efforts by the international community to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons programme. In this tradition, China should now support efforts to find answers to the questions the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons still has about Syria's chemical weapons programme and to bring those responsible for use of chemical weapons to justice. China's support for international efforts to provide accountability surrounding Syria's chemical weapons may open a pathway toward a more constructive engagement of China more generally.

### **Low-hanging fruit: Engagement on issues of shared interest**

Opportunities for coordination or cooperation between China and Europe may exist on issues which China does not see as essential for military competition with the United States and where it is interested in strengthening international cooperation to prevent escalation of conflicts.

11 Federal Government of the Republic of Germany. "Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany." Berlin, 2023, p. 55.

12 [https://x.com/CHNMFA\\_DAC/status/1866384651998376362](https://x.com/CHNMFA_DAC/status/1866384651998376362)

13 Zhu, Junwei. "Nuclear Fail-Safe: An Opportunity for the World." China-US Focus, 24 December 2024. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/nuclear-fail-safe-an-opportunity-for-the-world>.

14 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "No-First-Use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative," 23 July 2024. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202407/t20240723\\_11458632.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202407/t20240723_11458632.html).

15 United States Department of State. "CEND Subgroup 3 on Interim Measures to Reduce the Risks Associated with Nuclear Weapons," June 7, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/cend-subgroup-3-on-interim-measures-to-reduce-the-risks-associated-with-nuclear-weapons/>.

16 Broad, William J., Chris Buckley, and Jonathan Corum. "China Quietly Rebuilds Secretive Base for Nuclear Tests." The New York Times, 20 December 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/20/science/china-nuclear-tests-lop-nur.html>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "2024 National Data Center Workshop Opens in Beijing," 22 October 2024. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/zjzg\\_663340/jkxw\\_665232/jkxw\\_665234/202410/t20241023\\_11513229.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/zjzg_663340/jkxw_665232/jkxw_665234/202410/t20241023_11513229.html).

For example, Chinese experts highlight risks emanating from nuclear facilities in conflict zones as one issue for discussion. Beijing has made the issue of “keeping nuclear power plants safe” one of the priorities under its 12-point February 2023 “Peace Plan” for Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> China is likely concerned about attacks on North Korean nuclear facilities, should the conflict on the Korean peninsula escalate militarily. It may also be worried about the impact of the weaponisation of peaceful facilities in conflict zones on its effort to sell nuclear technology.<sup>18</sup>

For Germany, there is considerable fear of attacks on nuclear facilities because of the perilous state of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station as well as other nuclear facilities in and around Ukraine that have been or could be affected by Russia’s war against Ukraine. Germany has phased out nuclear energy use for electricity production. Strengthening the protection of peaceful nuclear facilities in areas of conflict offers an opportunity for Berlin to contribute to NPT discussions on strengthening cooperation on peaceful uses, in which it otherwise can only participate in a limited way.

Both countries are also worried about attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities and have vested interests in preventing Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. Opportunities for increased cooperation between Europe and China may also exist with regard to Iran’s nuclear programme more generally. Germany and China (as well as the EU) are participants in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to rebuild trust in the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme. Both fulfilled their obligations longer than any of the other JCPOA parties.

Yet, given the dynamic situation in the region, and the unclear stance of the Trump administration on the Iran nuclear file, it is difficult to anticipate when and how such opportunities for coordination may come up. But both sides may want to review their respective expectations and approaches toward the Iranian nuclear programme.

Europeans and China are concerned about the military cooperation and political alignment between North Korea (DPRK) and Russia. Chinese experts note that China did not join the alliance between Russia and the DPRK when Moscow and Pyongyang concluded their Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in June 2024.<sup>19</sup> Chinese observers, like Europeans, are worried that a possible quid

pro quo for sending North Korean troops to push back the Ukrainian incursion in the Kursk region could possibly involve the supply of Russian nuclear weapons technologies to North Korea. Russia may also recognise North Korea as a nuclear weapon state, thereby reducing UN security pressures on Pyongyang to disarm.

Germany and Europe may also want to further explore Chinese views on governance-based approaches to reducing risks associated with dual-use technologies. One example are efforts to strengthen biosecurity. Germany had supported the Tianjin guidelines for better biosecurity, which were largely developed by China, and regrets that they fell victim to Russian obstruction at the 9th Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) Review Conference in December 2022.

In December 2024, Russia torpedoed an agreement to convene a special conference of states party to the BWC in 2025. The conference was expected to agree on two mechanisms, one to improve cooperation on peaceful uses of biotechnology and another to establish a scientific advisory board to review relevant technological developments. In line with its emphasis on economic development, China is particularly interested in a mechanism for international cooperation and assistance. Germany and other Europeans have invested time and energy to establish a new Scientific Advisory Board on scientific and technological developments for the BWC.<sup>20</sup> Both may therefore want to explore joint approaches to circumventing the Russian blockade.

Finally, there appears to be a shared concern about violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) in the context of ongoing conflicts. IHL norms are under pressure, including in Europe. For example, Lithuania has announced its withdrawal from the Oslo Convention banning cluster munitions and Finland is reconsidering its membership under the Ottawa Convention prohibiting anti-personnel landmines. China has not joined either treaty, but its role in humanitarian arms control is strikingly ambivalent. Thus, in September 2024, China, together with Brazil, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan and South Africa launched a global initiative to galvanise political commitment to IHL and called for a high-level meeting to uphold humanity in war to be held in 2026.<sup>21</sup> This could provide opportunities to involve Beijing more closely in humanitarian arms control, which would very much be in Germany’s and Europe’s interest.

17 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis,” 24 February 2023. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530\\_11331711.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11331711.html).

18 Li, Aitong, Yahan Liu, and Zongyao Yu. “China’s Nuclear Exports: Understanding the Dynamics between Domestic Governance Reforms and International Market Competition.” *Energy Research & Social Science* 103 (September 2023): 103230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2023.103230>.

19 “DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” 20 June 2024. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1718870859-459880358/dprk-russia-treaty-on-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

20 Germany and China independently sponsored capacity-building events for BWC state parties to encourage them to submit confidence-building measures and increase biosecurity efforts under the BWC. Richard Guthrie: “Approaching the endgame, but an abrupt halt to consultations”, BioWeapons Prevention Project, report 2024-15, 13 December 2024, <https://cbw-events.org.uk/BWC24-15.pdf>.

21 International Committee of the Red Cross. “Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan, South Africa Launch a Global Initiative to Galvanise Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law and Call for a High-Level Meeting to Uphold Humanity in War in 2026,” 27 September 2024. <https://www.icrc.org/en/news-release/global-initiative-galvanise-political-commitment-ihl-uphold-humanity-war>.

## Targeted multilateralism: pursuing focused and flexible engagement

Arms control experts like to compare the mounting nuclear competition between China, Russia and the United States to the three-body problem in physics. The three largest possessors of nuclear weapons are described as three bodies revolving around each other in unpredictable ways, making it impossible to stabilise relations between them. In the famous sci-fi novel trilogy “The Three-Body Problem” by Chinese author Liu Cixin, aliens live on a planet in a chaotic orbit around such a three-star constellation. These aliens exist in constant fear of being thrown into orbits around the stars that are too close or too remote for survival. To survive, these aliens have developed the ability to dehydrate and go into hibernation, whenever things get too hot or too cold.<sup>22</sup>

Many see Europe’s role in international relations as being similar to that of the aliens: without any influence on relations between China, Russia and the United States, so goes the argument, Europe should put efforts for arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation on hold until the stars are better aligned.

But this perspective of Europe as a bystander on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation is dangerous, inadequate and lazy. Europeans in the past have and still can influence great power dynamics in a positive direction. Europe does have agency when it comes to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. And not all arms control issues are equally affected by three-body dynamics.

China like the other nuclear weapon states and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council bears a special responsibility to uphold the international order. China and Europe should discuss which arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation problems should best be dealt with among the nuclear weapon states and where Europeans have a role in stabilising three-body dynamics. Both will also have to use their partnerships with “difficult friends” in the “three-body constellation”. China will need to distance itself from Russia’s destructive policies in multilateral fora. During a Trump administration, Europeans will have to balance their wish to maintain good ties with the United States against a need to achieve autonomy on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, particularly on issues where Washington will take fundamentally different approaches.

China will need to begin closing the gap between its stated ambitions to support multilateralism with its often overly passive policies. Useful proposals like the initiative for a no-first-use treaty will need to be followed up by specific engagements not only with other nuclear weapon states,

but the wider NPT community more generally. China also needs to address inconsistencies in its arms control policies. Thus, Beijing’s criticism of NATO’s nuclear-sharing arrangements would be more credible if China were to also criticise similar arrangements by Russia and Belarus, which argue that they are copying NATO nuclear sharing.

Europeans will need to up their level of ambition, too. In 2003, the EU adopted the first and only European Security Strategy and a Strategy against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. This was in reaction to the neoconservative agenda of the George W. Bush administration and the US invasion of Iraq. We may now well be moving toward a similar moment, when the EU unites around the push for an updated “effective multilateralism” that includes ambitious goals on taking ADN forward.

The following specific steps might help gain traction toward a structured and focussed dialogue between China and Germany on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation:

- A track 2.0 conference with Chinese and German think-tankers and academics to discuss shared interests on specific issues where European and Chinese interests overlap;
- A Sino-European dialogue on ways to better protect civil nuclear facilities in zones of conflict and war;
- A civil society dialogue on ways to strengthen the nuclear taboo and raise the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons;
- A German-Chinese research project to look at the role of transparency measures in conflict de-escalation, non-proliferation and disarmament; and
- Engagement of Chinese and European experts in verification research with a view to encouraging China to return to the International Partnership on Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV).

Focused, substantive and flexible dialogues between Europeans and Chinese on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation can help to escape three-body dynamics. Such discussions will take time, and could initially focus on those issues where some alignment exists, or where action is urgently required, like nuclear risk-reduction. While working on such low-hanging fruit, both sides may also reach out even further, seeking to explore positions on fruit that hangs higher. Spoiler alert: In “The Three-Body Problem” trilogy, the aliens escape their unsustainable position by moving to another planet, the Earth. Neither Europe nor China have that option.

<sup>22</sup> Liu, Cixin. *The Three-Body Problem*. Translated by Ken Liu. *Three-Body Trilogy*, Book I. New York: Tor Books, 2014.

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