

## Arms Control and World Order: A Chinese Perspective

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### Introduction

In early February 2019, the United States announced the start of the withdrawal process from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the abandonment became true in August 2019. The death of the INF Treaty caused great concern to the world community, because the INF Treaty was the first treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union to disarm a whole category of nuclear weapons and provided the basic trust for the two nuclear superpowers to further their nuclear arms control and disarmament and to maintain a relatively stable strategic relationship.

With the end of the INF Treaty, plus the clear intention of the Trump Administration to improve and modernise its strategic arsenals and the continuous tension between the United States and Russia, the world community worries that all of the arms control measures between the two nuclear superpowers established in past decades have been falling apart and thereafter major powers can no longer keep strategic stability. The whole world possibly would be dragged into a dangerous military build-up and power competition. The return to a Hobbesian world is truly worrisome.

Out of the above concerns, this paper tries to analyse the seriousness of the challenges that the international arms control system faces, to explore whether it is possible and how to maintain the values of arms control and to keep the world in strategic stability. The author argues that it seems to be inevitable for the international arms control system to face challenges at the current stage. The challenges are real and serious, but it is still possible to keep the world restraint and away from military competition, if the world community can work together and re-regulate big powers into the international institutions.

### Challenges Faced by the International Arms Control System

To some degree, it is inevitable for the existing arms control system to confront challenges, because the world is changing very quickly. The changes come from the development of science and technologies, from the evolution of the international system and from the shift

of major power relations. International arms control arrangements have to adapt to and keep pace with the new reality.

### **The Emergence of New Technologies**

In the past years, the development of new sciences and technologies has gone beyond the expectations of many people. Twenty years ago, we did not expect that the storage capacity of a chip could be so big. We did not expect that the speed of the network could be so quick. Nor did we expect that the mobile phone could be used as a personal computer. Now, all of these are a reality. The world has developed so fast in the era of information that it actually has crossed into the era of digitalisation, which is represented by technologies such as big data, system integration and artificial intelligence (AI). With the new technologies, new weapon systems, new modes of war operations and even new domains of fighting are also rising on the horizon. The international arms community finds itself in this situation: on one side, the new technologies have many new features, for example, fluidity, crypticity and dual-use purpose, but on the other side, the arms control instruments are quite old and were developed on the basis of the military practices in the Industrialisation Era. Will the old instruments still be relevant and effective in preventing the new technologies from being weaponised? The answer seems not to be so confident.

### **The Increasing Sense of Insecurity**

Making things even worse is that after the end of the Cold War, the sense of security for many countries did not increase as expected. The demise of the bipolar structure of the world system, on the contrary, provided room for regional and internal conflicts. The two former leading powers, in the post-Cold War era, did not want to spend their resources any more to take charge of chaos and conflicts in the regions in which they had no vital interests. And then some countries decided to depend on their own fatal weapons to strive for their interests.

Thus, there is a paradoxical phenomenon in the post-Cold War era: on one side, the overall situation in the world is peaceful, and the relationship among major powers remains stable and even cooperative; but on the other side, the incentives for some countries to pursue nuclear weapons are increasing. Many more countries have broken and tried to break the bottom line of nuclear nonproliferation in the post-Cold War era.

Fairly speaking, leading countries made efforts to strengthen and mend the international system of arms control and nonproliferation. The Clinton Administration of the United States very actively pushed forward the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the conclusion of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Obama Administration initiated the process of a nuclear-free world, and even the George W. Bush Administration, which was not interested in multilateralism and arms control, carried out a counter-proliferation initiative and concluded the so-called Moscow Treaty with Russia.

These efforts to some degree maintain the moral authority of the international arms control and nonproliferation system, but they have not effectively tackled the problem of a lack of security sense by some critical countries. The pace of violating nuclear nonproliferation and

arms control has further continued and finally reached a point with a potential to totally overthrow the system.

### **The Changing of the Paradigm Guiding Major Power Relations**

That the Trump Administration took power in the United States further pushed the international system of arms control and nonproliferation to breaking point. It is not just because the Trump Administration dislikes the international system of arms control and nonproliferation. In fact, its preceding Republican administration, led by President George W. Bush, rejected multilateralism and arms control also. What is more dangerous from the Trump Administration is that the Administration seems to be redefining the guiding philosophy of the international system.

After the end of the Cold War, generally speaking, the world entered into a kind of order called “liberal internationalism,” which was led by the United States and its western allies and accepted by all major countries including those from the non-western culture. China, as a country with a different governing ideology and political system, gradually participated in and even prepared to comprehensively integrate into the international system, after it took the policy of opening-up and reform. Up to now, China has not changed its support for the international system, although it avoids using the words “liberal internationalism” to describe the international order and does complain on some occasions of the unfair arrangements of the system.

For those who regard China as the main challenger to the current international order, it might be difficult to understand why a country led by the Communist Party can accept and is willing to support the current international order of liberalism. The answer is that there actually are two different interpretations of the so-called international order of liberalism.

One interpretation is relatively narrow and puts emphasis on the differing ideologies, but the other one is much broader, just like what G. John Ikenberry says, “At its most basic, liberal internationalism offers a version of an open, rule-based system in which states trade and cooperate to achieve mutual gains.”<sup>1</sup> China thinks that the current international system has the features of the second interpretation, because in the age of economic globalisation, countries are not only economically interdependent on each other, but also have to work together to deal with many transnational and global challenges, such as climate change, epidemics of disease, terrorism etc. Countries with different political systems and different cultural and religious backgrounds can live together in a system ruled by international laws, China believes.

Following the understanding of the international system, China in past decades has firmly and actively taken actions to join international institutions. China’s consistent access to the WTO is one example in the economic field. And in the field of security and global governance, China adjusted its attitude to international nuclear nonproliferation. Of course, China has

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<sup>1</sup> G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order,” *Perspectives on Politics*, March 2009, Vol. 7/No. 1, p.72.

not been integrated into the international system one hundred percent, but China's involvement is substantial and real. China is the stake-holder of the current international system. It is not in China's interest to destroy the international system from which it benefits.

So, the real challenge to the international system is the force that lost their interests in the development of economic interdependence and globalisation. From that point of view, the 2008 financial crisis was the critical moment of change. The crisis broke out in the United States, the leading country of the current international order, and stirred up anti-globalism movements in developed countries. In response to the crisis, the U.S. Obama Administration took action to re-adjust, reform and improve global governance in economic and other fields. However, the pro-globalisation administration did not finish the goal of consolidating the global order of liberal internationalism. And after the Trump Administration took power, the United States soon changed the narratives on world order, transferring its attention from handling global challenges to competition among major countries.

Therefore, the substantial challenge confronted by the international system of arms control and nonproliferation at this moment is that the leading country of the world order no longer believes the philosophy underlining the current system. The United States is going back to the Hobbesian understanding of the international system, which totally ignores the restraints provided by international laws and morality to major powers' behaviours. With the change of guiding philosophy on world order, it can be expected that major countries will have more incentives and legal bases to develop arms forces. It may not be totally impossible to see again arms control and disarmament, but it can only happen after major countries exhaust their resources and tools in arms competition and the power comparison returns to a new equilibrium.

So, the challenges confronted by the international system of arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament come from at least three aspects. The first is the development of new science and technologies, which is unstoppable; the second is the increasing sense of insecurity in some regions; and the third is the loss of confidence in the liberal order based on international laws and major countries' cooperation. Since the latter two challenges both lead to the weakness of the institution itself, the next critical question will be whether the liberal institution of arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament still can be saved?

### **The Liberal Order: The Leader and The Rest**

To answer the question, the first thing that needs to be clarified is that the leadership of the United States does not equate to the liberal order of internationalism. It is true that the United States made great contributions to establishing and maintaining the international order. The United States, as the leader of the international system, plays a critical role in the survival and the health of the system, and that's why the whole international community worries and becomes pessimistic when the United States takes actions to withdraw from the arms control and nonproliferation institutions. However, the leader after all is not the system itself. The founding of the liberal order of internationalism after the end of World War II had a lot to do with the proper subjective and objective conditions.

## **The Conditions for the Liberal Order**

The subjective elements conducive to the establishment of the liberal order of internationalism refer to the people's willingness to see an international system taking care of world peace and security. After two bloody world wars, it is believed that some kind of international institutions are necessary. The international institution should not be as idealistic as the League of the Nations, but it should keep the advantageous parts of the League - managing world affairs by international laws, and then giving the institution power so that it can restrain the disordered competition among major powers.

The thinking of how to maintain world peace and security largely was represented in the design of the United Nations: on one side, the United Nations embodies the liberal approach of managing the world by international treaties and laws; but on the other side, the United Nations recognises the importance of power, setting up a security council with the five powerful countries as its permanent members. In format, the United Nations is a combination of liberal and realistic approaches to managing world affairs, but in essence, the United Nations represents more a liberal international order, which believes international laws and institutions are the final way to maintain world peace and security. However, it needs help from the powerful countries and it is impossible to work out a "world government" in reality.

In the following decades, the liberal order sustained its role of maintaining world peace and security in the fierce competition between the two superpowers and their allies. It might be the fear of an out of control confrontation between the two superpowers and the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that firmed support of the liberal arrangements of managing world peace and security. After the end of the Cold War, however, compliance with international institutions is going down. People do not worry about the confrontation between the superpowers and the exchanges of nuclear weapons any more. It might not be a good sign because it weakens the subjective support for managing world affairs by international laws. The international community has to take actions to re-consolidate the awareness that rule of law, not power politics, is the best way to sustain world peace and security and to defend the interests of most countries.

On another front, economic and technology developments since the 1950s also require world affairs to be managed in a cooperative and lawful way. In the days after World War II, the world politically was separated into two camps, but this could not stop the development of business. From the ruins of World War II, transnational corporations developed very fast. They not only grew quickly in numbers, but the way corporations operated also totally changed. In contrast to international corporations before WWII, transnational corporations recognised the global allocation of resources, procurement, production and sale. This kind of operational mode of transnational corporations greatly improved the economic interdependence of the world, which is the basic theory supporting the liberal management of world affairs.

According to the above interpretation, it is also very clear why the so-called "de-coupling" operation favoured by the Trump Administration will be very harmful to the liberal order of internationalism. President Trump seems to be set on disrupting and changing the global

allocation of economic cooperation. The question is whether the business mode which was developed and has been operating for decades after the end of World War II can be easily and totally changed? As a country which may seriously suffer from this change, China cannot under-estimate the possibility of change to the global supply, production and value chains. However, on the other side, China still believes that modern technologies and economic development have an inherent capability of expanding and connecting the world. To China, economic globalisation is still the trend, although it faces some obstacles at this moment and needs adjustment.

So, positively speaking, the subjective and the objective factors leading to the liberal way of managing world affairs are still there. The question is whether the international community still can energise the system when the leading country does not want to take the responsibility any more or even becomes a negative element in the system.

### **The Rest of the System**

The liberal order of the international system is the collective choice of the international community. The leading country of this system of course is important, especially with the outstanding capability of mobilisation, and the other parts of the community are also very important. Without the support and restraint of the mass non-nuclear weapon states, the international regime of nuclear nonproliferation could not exist at all. It is also under the pressure from the non-nuclear weapon states and medium and smaller countries that the five nuclear weapon states made a series of commitments in 1995 to extend the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It is clear that the rest of the system also plays a very critical role in sustaining the international order of arms control and nonproliferation. The question is how the rest can exert their influence in the current circumstances.

Compared with the leading country, the rest of the system can hardly decide the agenda of international arms control and nonproliferation. The weakness of the rest may come from two sides: on one side, the rest of the system is basically composed of medium and smaller countries. They are not as powerful as the leading country, and usually lack bargaining capacity with big countries. On the other side, the rest of the system covers a large number of countries. Those countries are at a different economic level and have a different cultural background. Their interests are different and they have different priorities for the arms control and nonproliferation agenda. Thus, the rest of the international system often finds it difficult to unite various forces to set the agenda and press the big powers to follow. The rest of the system has to find some way to overcome the weakness.

Of course, the rest of the system also has its advantages. Many countries in the rest of the group, in fact, are economically advanced countries, belonging to so-called post-modern societies. They are suppliers of concepts, norms and even regulations. It is expected that they will continue to and further play a role in world affairs including arms control and nonproliferation.

China respects the role of middle countries and their groups in international affairs very much, because China knows that the countries and country groups have the power of intellectual property. In its interactions with the world, China has noticed that concepts

such as cooperative security, common security, APEC, climate change etc. are all from medium countries. Although there are gaps on value issues, China thinks that European countries basically have a deeper understanding of the complexity of history, which differs from the relatively simple history perspective of the United States.

Therefore, China quite actively approached European and other western countries after the 2008 financial crisis, although some people in the world were not that confident in Europe at the period of time. China believes that, as the countries in the advanced stage of development, western countries, industrial countries and post-modern countries may be quicker to sense the direction of the future development of the world. China would like to learn and share the wisdom of these countries.

However, on the other side, it seems that European and middle powers have not found the proper way to mobilise the emerging powers, including China, to be reliable forces to promote the international community's agenda of arms control and nonproliferation. The obstacles to engagement with China on arms control and nonproliferation may come from three aspects.

Firstly, it is not prepared. Since it was the United States that took the responsibility to mobilise the international community and set the agenda, European and middle powers do not have the preparations and effective channels to replace the role of the United State at the moment.

Secondly, it is not believed that China can be a positive and cooperative partner to push forward the international community's agenda of arms control and nonproliferation. China develops very fast and it is modernising its military forces. With this background, the world doubts that China will be positive and active in international cooperation on arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament.

Thirdly, the goals of arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament have not been updated for some time. Since the leading country has dominated the agenda-setting of arms control and nonproliferation for quite a long period of time, the goals of the system are more representative of the interests of the leading country. To mobilise more support for the international system, European and middle countries have to integrate more requirements from different circles. The emerging powers and non-western countries should be regarded as partners with common interests, not the targets, of the international system.

So, the international system of arms control and nonproliferation confronts challenges. The main problem is that the leading country has lost interest in arms control and the paradigm of major power cooperation. It is expected that the rest of the liberal system of internationalism can take more responsibility and find ways to re-energise the system.

## China's Policy Tendency on Arms Control and Nonproliferation

### China's Policy on Nuclear Issues

China supports the international system of arms control and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), because she believes that more actors with nuclear bombs makes the world more dangerous. China makes efforts on nuclear nonproliferation on both internal and external fronts. Domestically, China takes a quite restrained nuclear policy. From the first day of possessing nuclear weapons, China announced that it would not be the first to use nuclear weapons and would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon countries. China thinks that the final goal should be total and complete nuclear disarmament. China established a whole set of export control systems to manage well sensitive materials and technologies in accordance with international standards. On the global scale, China keeps its nuclear arsenal at a very small and limited level. All those practices clearly indicate the defensive nature of the Chinese nuclear programme. China is careful to avoid its nuclear programme being a stimulant for nuclear proliferation.

Internationally, China is actively joining in multilateral cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation. Firstly, China has joined the most important international regime in the field of nuclear nonproliferation. Secondly, China supports the nuclear nonproliferation treaty which is the pillar of the current international regime of nuclear nonproliferation. Thirdly, China has made contributions to hot spot cases, for example, actively participating in the multilateral process regarding Korean and Iranian nuclear problems.

### China's Peaceful Defence Policy

As to the national defence policy of China, there are two aspects which are useful in understanding the position of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the whole system of China. First, from the political perspective, the PLA is under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Secondly, from the nation-military relations, the national defence strategy must follow the overall strategy of China.

Since the 1980s, the overall strategy of China has been consistent. This is called peaceful development. Development is the central task of the Chinese government and peace is the significant condition for development. Guided by the overall strategy of peaceful development, the PLA takes a defensive policy towards national defence. The fundamental mission of the PLA is to defend China's national interest of sovereignty and security.

In the past few decades, the Chinese military has accelerated the progress of modernisation, which is well understood and supported by the Chinese people and the Chinese government. There are some concerns overseas about the fast development of the Chinese military, but domestically the whole of Chinese society supports the fast modernisation of the PLA. To a large degree, Chinese society thinks that the PLA has left behind the modernisation of the country. In the four modernisations proposed by late Premier Zhou Enlai—referring to the modernisation of manufacture, agriculture, national defence, and science and technology—the modernisation of the Chinese military developed most slowly. The common sense in



China is that the military's development has to catch up with the overall development of the country. Otherwise, the national interests of China cannot be protected well.

Therefore, while the modernisation of the Chinese military is widely supported by the Chinese people, it does not mean the Chinese military changes the defensive nature of the defence policy. In the age of economic globalisation, of course, the Chinese military will go abroad more frequently and will go farther away from the homeland. That is because the PLA will have to take more overseas responsibility when more and more Chinese people and companies go abroad. In addition, China is also expected to provide more public goods for the world and for the region of Asia Pacific. The PLA can make more contributions to maintaining world peace and security.

### **Areas to Explore for Arms Control and Disarmament**

Despite the military development, there are still motivations for the Chinese military to carry out disarmament. China needs to readjust the structure of the military force. To transform into a lean, dynamic military with better equipment, the PLA has room to decrease the quantity of military personnel. In addition, it is the consistent policy of China not to become involved in the arms race. China will continue to keep restraint and not to over-respond to the new developments of the U.S. and Russian military posture.

In practice, China will pay a lot of attention to stabilising its strategic relationship with major countries, especially with the United States. Firstly, China and the United States may reassure each other that they share some common values on the world order. For example, China and the United States may re-affirm that they both support a just and fair world order, in which all countries, no matter big or small, are equal and have the right to enjoy a peaceful, prosperous and respected life.

Secondly, China and the United States may consult with each other on what kinds of institutions have been out of date and how to update and reform the institutions. In security areas, there are also a lot of new challenges, ranging from cross-border problems to the instability in some societies. The international community needs new perspectives, new approaches and new measures to handle the more complicated security situation, in which external and internal factors, economic, political and many other factors intertwine with each other.

Thirdly, China and the United States should resume and carry out effective dialogue on nuclear issues. Influenced by the bilateral relationship, the nuclear dialogue between China and the United States cannot cover deep and substantial issues. The relevant circles of the two countries should try to find ways to push forward the dialogue, for example, related to the nuclear doctrines, to the policy of non-targeting, to the issue of missile defence and deployment of tactical missiles, etc.

In the multilateral arena, China tends to pay more attention to the following issues. The first is nuclear security and safety. China thinks that this has a practical meaning: to assure security and safety of nuclear facilities. The nuclear industry is still on the rise in China and China believes nuclear energy will also be demanded by many other developing countries. Therefore, it will be very important to strengthen the security and safety of the nuclear

facilities. That's why Chinese presidents took part in all of the nuclear security summits proposed by former U.S. President Obama. There are quite good bases for further pushing forward the cooperation on nuclear security and safety.

Secondly, China attaches importance to security in the Asia Pacific region. China noticed that regional security mechanisms in Asia Pacific are very weak. The region has quite bright prospects of development, but lacks institutions and instruments to secure the development. China would like to cooperate with regional countries to build up more reliable mechanisms to safeguard regional security in Asia Pacific.

Thirdly, China will continue to support the reinforcement of global arms control and nonproliferation institutions. The IAEA and some other existing institutions face challenges, but they should not be given up. China will join in the efforts to further reform and consolidate the institutions.

Finally, China believes that more attention has to be given to the new strategic domains. One of the areas of course is cyber security. It will be positive for China to carry out more dialogue with major countries on the issue. Secondly, outer space is also a potential area for major countries to coordinate their policy and to prevent weaponisation of and wars in outer space. Thirdly, the Chinese community can also carry out dialogue with their foreign counterparts on issues such as UAV and AI. China is open to joining the international community in various areas.

On the whole, China is positive towards supporting international arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament. Currently, the interactions between China and the international community are very limited. It will be very helpful if the international academic community and think tanks can link China and the world closer on arms control issues.

## The Author

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