



CHINA'S EXPANDING ARMS CONTROL AGENDA AND EAST ASIAN SECURITY

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Abstract

China has released its first standalone arms control white paper in two decades at a time of heightened nuclear risk, accelerating military technological change, and weakening global arms control regimes. The document signals a more assertive Chinese approach to arms control, combining long-standing principles such as no-first-use and UN-centred multilateralism with an expanded focus on emerging domains including artificial intelligence, cyberspace, and outer space. This policy brief argues that the white paper positions China less as a participant in traditional arms-reduction frameworks and more as a rule-shaper in future security governance. While Beijing emphasizes fairness, technological equity, and risk reduction, it avoids commitments on transparency and numerical limits on its growing nuclear forces. For disarmament actors in East Asia, this creates both opportunities for engagement and new constraints on arms-control cooperation. The brief assesses the implications of China's approach for regional stability and outlines practical options for governments, international organisations, and civil society to engage China on arms control while mitigating escalation risks.

1. Introduction: Why China's white paper matters for Asia

Arms control and disarmament efforts are under strain amid rising geopolitical rivalry, accelerating military technological change, and the erosion of long-standing international agreements. These pressures are particularly acute in East Asia, where nuclear-armed states, advanced missile capabilities, and emerging military technologies intersect in the absence of robust regional arms-control frameworks. The release of China's first standalone arms control white paper in two decade matters greatly in this context. [1]

China's growing military capabilities and its central role in the regional security environment mean that its approach to arms control shapes the conditions under which other states, international organisations, and civil society actors pursue disarmament objectives. The white paper released in November 2025 presents China as a defender of multilateralism and a proponent of arms control based on fairness, balance, and the interests of developing countries. At the same time, it reflects a more assertive posture, positioning China as an active participant in shaping rules and norms for future security governance rather than as a follower of existing regimes.

Disarmament actors in East Asia should pay attention to the following observations: While China reiterates long-standing commitments that are often viewed as stabilising, including no-first-use of nuclear weapons and opposition to arms races, the white paper avoids engagement with key concerns that dominate contemporary arms-control debates, such as transparency regarding nuclear force expansion and participation in numerical arms-reduction arrangements. Instead, it places more emphasis on emerging domains such as artificial intelligence, cyberspace, and outer space, reframing arms control as a multidomain governance challenge.

This policy brief examines what China's evolving arms-control agenda means for disarmament and arms-control efforts in East Asia. Rather than assessing the credibility of China's claims, it focuses on the practical implications of the white paper for regional stability, norm-setting, and risk reduction. By identifying areas of continuity, change, and omission, the brief outlines how governments, international organisations, and civil society actors can engage with China's stated positions while safeguarding broader disarmament objectives and managing escalation risks in a rapidly changing security environment.

[1] For more details on China's expanding arms control agenda from a global perspective, see: <https://jamestown.org/the-prcs-expanding-arms-control-agenda/>.

2. China's enduring arms control principles

China's arms control white papers, released in 1995, 2005, and 2025, present a set of principles that have remained remarkably consistent over three decades. Despite major changes in China's military capabilities, regional threat perceptions, and the global security environment, these documents frame arms control as an extension of a broader strategy aimed at preserving a stable external environment for national development.

A first enduring principle is the rejection of arms races and power politics (强权政治). China consistently portrays its military posture as defensive in nature and emphasizes that it seeks neither military superiority nor strategic dominance. Arms control is presented as a means of preventing destabilizing competition. For regional disarmament efforts, this framing reinforces China's stated opposition to unconstrained military escalation, even as its growing capabilities raise concerns among neighboring states.

A second pillar of continuity lies in China's approach to nuclear weapons. Across all three white papers, China reiterates its commitment to a no-first-use policy and to maintaining nuclear forces at the minimum level required for national security. It also reaffirms pledges not to deploy nuclear weapons on foreign territory and not to extend nuclear deterrence commitments to other states. These positions distinguish China from other nuclear-armed powers and are often cited as evidence of a restrained nuclear posture. At the same time, the white papers do not specify how minimum deterrence is defined or how it evolves in response to changing technologies and threat perceptions, leaving considerable room for interpretation.

A third enduring feature is China's emphasis on multilateralism anchored in the United Nations. The white papers consistently situate legitimate arms control within UN-centred processes and express skepticism toward arrangements perceived as exclusive or bloc-based. This preference aligns with broader disarmament objectives that prioritize inclusivity and universal norms, but it also limits China's willingness to engage in smaller or regionally focused arms-control initiatives that fall outside UN frameworks.

Commitments to no-first-use, opposition to arms races, and support for multilateralism offer normative reference points that can underpin dialogue and confidence-building.

Taken together, these enduring principles provide both points of engagement and sources of friction for disarmament actors in East Asia. Commitments to no-first-use, opposition to arms races, and support for multilateralism offer normative reference points that can underpin dialogue and confidence-building. At the same time, the absence of operational detail and verification commitments constrains their immediate practical impact. Understanding these continuities is therefore essential for assessing how China's stated positions can be incorporated into regional and global disarmament efforts without overestimating their capacity to deliver concrete arms reductions.

3. What is new: Expansion into emerging security domains

The most significant departure from earlier Chinese arms control white papers is the expansion of arms control into emerging security domains (Chapter 4, 引领新兴领域国际安全治理). While previous documents focused primarily on nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction, and conventional arms, the 2025 white paper reframes arms control as a multidomain governance challenge. It introduces dedicated discussions of outer space, cyberspace, artificial intelligence, and technology controls, signaling China's intention to play a more active role in shaping the rules governing future forms of conflict.

This expansion reflects a broader shift in how China conceptualizes arms control. Rather than treating it solely as a mechanism for limiting existing weapons systems, the white paper presents arms control as a forward-looking process aimed at managing risks associated with technological change. In emerging domains, China emphasizes the importance of preventing arms races, reducing miscalculation, and establishing norms before destabilizing patterns of military competition become entrenched. This anticipatory framing aligns with growing international concern about the pace at which new technologies are being integrated into military planning and operations.

In the domain of outer space, the white paper reiterates support for preventing the weaponization of space and for strengthening international governance under United Nations auspices. China positions itself as a proponent of rules that preserve outer space for peaceful purposes, while calling for greater international cooperation and restraint. However, the document offers limited detail on implementation, verification, or confidence-building measures, leaving open questions about how abstract principles could translate into operational stability.

In cyberspace, the white paper reinforces China's long-standing emphasis on state sovereignty and the role of governments in regulating digital spaces. It highlights China's contributions to discussions within the United Nations on responsible state behaviour and presents cyber governance as a collective security issue requiring international coordination. For arms control and disarmament communities, this framing underscores the growing overlap between security, technology governance, and political control, complicating efforts to develop universally accepted norms.

The white paper's treatment of artificial intelligence is particularly notable. China calls for the preservation of human control over military applications of artificial intelligence and advocates the development of international governance frameworks to regulate their use. It also stresses the importance of ethics, safety, and risk prevention. By foregrounding these themes, the document positions China as a participant in emerging debates about how to manage the military implications of artificial intelligence before they generate irreversible escalation dynamics.

Across these domains, the white paper emphasizes fairness, inclusivity, and the interests of developing countries, framing technology governance as an extension of global disarmament debates. This approach allows China to link arms control with broader concerns about technological inequality and access, while also advancing its role as a norm-shaper in areas where binding treaties have yet to emerge. For disarmament actors in East Asia, the expansion into emerging domains creates new opportunities for engagement, but it also shifts attention away from traditional arms reduction and verification, raising questions about how these parallel agendas can be balanced.

4. What the white paper leaves unaddressed

While the 2025 arms control white paper expands the scope of China's engagement into emerging security domains, it remains notably silent on several issues that are central to contemporary arms-control and disarmament debates. These omissions reflect structural limits in China's approach to arms control and shape the conditions under which meaningful engagement is possible.

Most prominently, the white paper does not address numerical constraints, ceilings, or verification measures related to nuclear forces. Despite reaffirming commitments to no-first-use and minimum deterrence, the document provides no information on force size, deployment patterns, or the criteria used to assess sufficiency. It also avoids discussion of transparency mechanisms that would allow other states to assess changes in China's nuclear posture. For disarmament efforts, this absence limits the scope for confidence-building and complicates assessments of strategic stability in a region where multiple nuclear-armed states operate in close proximity.

The document also sidesteps calls for greater transparency that have accompanied concerns about China's rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal. Rather than engaging with these debates, the white paper emphasizes selective risk-reduction measures and voluntary restraint, framing transparency as a matter of national discretion rather than a reciprocal obligation. This approach preserves strategic ambiguity and provides flexibility for continued modernization, but it constrains the development of shared understandings that are often prerequisites for arms-control progress.

The white paper's omissions suggest that China's arms-control agenda prioritizes flexibility and norm-shaping over binding commitments and verification

In addition, the white paper does not signal openness to traditional bilateral or trilateral arms-reduction negotiations. China reiterates its preference for multilateral, United Nations-centred processes, but does not outline pathways for engaging in arrangements that address asymmetries among nuclear-armed states. As a result, existing gaps between China's stated principles and the expectations of other actors remain unresolved. For East Asia, where regional arms-control institutions are weak, this limits the availability of forums capable of addressing hard security issues directly.

Finally, the white paper offers limited clarity on how commitments in emerging domains relate to established arms-control goals. While norms and ethical principles are emphasized, mechanisms for monitoring compliance, preventing military misuse, or responding to violations are largely absent. This raises the risk that progress in emerging technology governance could proceed in parallel to, rather than in support of, broader disarmament objectives.

Taken together, these omissions suggest that China's arms-control agenda prioritizes flexibility and norm-shaping over binding commitments and verification. For disarmament actors, recognizing these limits is essential. Engagement strategies that assume a near-term shift toward numerical arms reductions or extensive transparency are unlikely to succeed. Instead, effective approaches will need to account for the constraints embedded in China's current posture while seeking incremental risk-reduction measures that can contribute to regional stability.

5. Implications for disarmament and arms control in East Asia

China's evolving arms-control agenda has significant implications for disarmament and arms-control efforts in East Asia. Enduring restraint-oriented principles and selective engagement in emerging domains shapes the opportunities and constraints facing regional actors.

A first implication concerns the growing asymmetry between traditional arms control and emerging technology governance. China's willingness to engage on norms related to artificial intelligence, cyberspace, and outer space contrasts sharply with its reluctance to discuss numerical limits, verification, or transparency in the nuclear domain. This creates a bifurcated arms-control landscape in which risk-reduction efforts advance unevenly across domains. For disarmament actors, this asymmetry raises the challenge of preventing progress in emerging areas from substituting for, rather than complementing, longer-term nuclear risk reduction.

Second, China's emphasis on multilateralism and inclusivity reinforces the centrality of United Nations-based processes but does little to fill the institutional gap at the regional level. East Asia lacks established mechanisms comparable to those that supported arms control in other regions, and China's preference for global forums limits the scope for region-specific confidence-building arrangements. As a result, regional actors may find themselves dependent on global processes that move slowly and are shaped by broader geopolitical dynamics.

Third, the white paper's framing of arms control around fairness and the interests of developing countries has implications for coalition-building within disarmament forums. By linking arms control to issues of technological equity and access, China appeals to states that perceive existing regimes as unequal or exclusionary. In East Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific, this narrative may resonate beyond traditional alignments, complicating efforts to forge consensus around transparency, verification, and restraint.

China's arms-control posture suggests a future in which progress is more likely in norm-setting and risk management than in formal arms reductions

At the same time, China's reiterated commitments to no-first-use, opposition to arms races, and risk prevention provide normative reference points that can support dialogue. These principles offer a basis for engagement focused on crisis management, confidence-building, and escalation control, even in the absence of binding arms-reduction agreements. For disarmament practitioners, the task is to translate these general commitments into practical measures that reduce miscalculation and enhance predictability.

Overall, China's arms-control posture suggests a future in which progress is more likely in norm-setting and risk management than in formal arms reductions. For East Asia, this underscores the importance of sustained engagement that acknowledges strategic realities while keeping disarmament objectives visible. Arms control in the region is likely to advance incrementally, through overlapping global and regional initiatives, rather than through comprehensive agreements. Recognizing this trajectory is essential for developing realistic strategies that contribute to stability and reduce the risk of escalation in an increasingly complex security environment.

6. Policy recommendations

China's evolving arms-control agenda does not point toward near-term nuclear arms reductions, but it does open specific avenues for engagement on risk reduction, norm-setting, and confidence-building. Disarmament actors in East Asia can pursue pragmatic strategies that reduce escalation risks while preserving longer-term arms-control objectives.

FOR GOVERNMENTS IN EAST ASIA

- Increase engagement with China on risk-reduction mechanisms, including crisis communication channels, incident-prevention measures, and exchanges on escalation dynamics, particularly in relation to emerging technologies.
- Support confidence-building initiatives that do not rely on numerical force limits, such as transparency about doctrines, notifications of major military activities, and discussions of operational safety in nuclear and non-nuclear domains.
- Encourage dialogue that links emerging technology governance with strategic stability, ensuring that progress in areas such as artificial intelligence and space security reinforces, rather than displaces, broader disarmament goals.

FOR INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND UNITED NATIONS BODIES

- Expand inclusive UN-based forums that integrate arms control, disarmament, and emerging technology governance, with sustained participation from Asian states.
- Clarify norms related to the military use of artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and space systems, emphasizing human control, risk prevention, and escalation management.
- Promote reporting, peer review, and voluntary transparency measures as interim tools where binding verification remains politically unattainable.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND RESEARCH COMMUNITIES

- Strengthen Asia-based Track-II and Track-1.5 dialogues focused on arms control and emerging technologies, ensuring sustained engagement with Chinese experts and institutions.
- Map areas of overlap between China's stated arms-control principles and existing disarmament norms to identify feasible entry points for cooperation.
- Invest in research on escalation risks in multidomain conflict, translating technical findings into policy-relevant insights accessible to decision-makers.

7. Conclusion

China's latest arms control white paper reflects continuity in stated principles but a clear shift in ambition and scope. By expanding arms control into emerging security domains while avoiding commitments on nuclear transparency and numerical limits, China is reshaping the landscape in which disarmament efforts in East Asia must operate. This approach creates openings for engagement on risk reduction and norm-setting, even as it constrains prospects for traditional arms-reduction agreements.

For disarmament actors in the region, the central challenge is to engage China where dialogue is possible without losing sight of longer-term objectives related to restraint, transparency, and verification. Incremental progress in confidence-building and emerging technology governance can help mitigate escalation risks, but it should complement rather than replace efforts to address nuclear dangers. Sustained, inclusive engagement that is anchored in regional perspectives and multilateral processes will be essential for advancing arms control and disarmament in an increasingly complex security environment.



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