

China's Role in Multilateral Arms Control

A Geneva Security Debate

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

**Speech by
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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon!

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the GCSP and online for the 13th Geneva Security Debate.

Today, we will address the topic of "China's Role in Multilateral Arms Control". It is a highly relevant and timely topic for a number of reasons, to which I will come back in a minute.

The Geneva Security Debates is a series of public discussions which explores pressing and current security challenges. On a regular basis, we bring together leading thinkers, experts, and policymakers for interactive discussions on a specific security challenge.

The short-term goal of the Geneva Security Debates is to inform, provide new insights, stimulate joint reflections, and create networks among policymakers and experts in Geneva and abroad.

In the long term, these events series seek to contribute to shaping a better global future.

Today's Geneva Security Debate is special in that it is organised in partnership with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. I am grateful for this collaboration and pleased to see that our organisations have successfully joined forces to offer this space for an open debate on this urgent security topic. I would like to acknowledge that in the dialogue domain, we have already established successful cooperation on issues related to European security matters.

Why does arms control matter in today's world? And why is China's involvement in it crucial?

When we speak of arms control, we generally refer to any international control or limitation of the world's most powerful weapons.

Arms control regulations target not only the use but also the development, testing, manufacture, deployment and exchange of weapons.

Such regulations can be quantitative in nature. Examples are agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which aimed at limiting the number of nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles in their possession.

Arms control regulations can also be qualitative in nature and prohibit a specific subset of weapons. For example, the Chemical Weapons Convention bans the production and use of certain chemical agents.

In the case of nuclear weapons, the approach, as promoted by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NNT), has been to prevent additional countries from acquiring nuclear weapons while recognising the status and responsibilities of a number of existing nuclear weapons states.

I wanted to introduce these few definitional notions to now highlight the challenges that arms control faces in today's world. The reasons for the growing challenges are geopolitical trends and technological advances.

The concept of arms control implies some form of cooperative efforts between states that are – generally speaking – antagonistic or in competition with each other.

In this time of growing tensions in great-power relations, arms control agreements have become both more important but also more difficult to reach and maintain. As a matter of fact, most of the arms control architecture built in the latter stages of the Cold War and, since the end of the Cold War, has crumbled and fallen apart.

This is, for example, illustrated by Russia's suspension of the New START Treaty earlier this year – which was the last bilateral nuclear disarmament treaty in force.

Arms control agreements can be concluded between two countries bilaterally – or many countries, meaning multilaterally. Today's focus is on multilateral arms control.

And just as Russia suspends the last major arms control treaty, China is about to considerably expand its nuclear arsenal, as described in the Pentagon's most recent annual report. The US prepares for a new world in which Beijing, in addition to Moscow and Washington, will likely be "atomic peers".

But geopolitical competition is not only heating up at the global level. Regional developments in Asia are equally worrying. The deepening US-China strategic competition is fueling tensions in a region that is conflict-prone and suffers from structural insecurity. Due to growing mutual threat perceptions, countries are investing in their military build-up. Northeast Asian geopolitics today are marked by new bloc politics, the continuous threat of an isolated, nuclear-armed North Korea, and an increasing focus on deterrence rather than dialogue.

A major challenge in all this is that these developments, that is, China's unprecedented nuclear expansion, but also the expansion of extended deterrence among US allies, occur in the absence of any arms control or disarmament measures or any progress in risk reduction or any meaningful strategic dialogue. With such unrestrained and unregulated competition, we face new risks of escalation.

On top of all this, existing arms control mechanisms struggle to keep pace with technological innovation: Artificial Intelligence and generally emerging technologies complicate the picture and add new dangers to a geopolitically tense environment.

In today's world, arms control could be a key tool for managing strategic competition and containing risks. Arms control mechanisms could create transparency and predictability around the world's most dangerous weapons. Arms control arrangements – and they could also take the form of informal multilateral risk reduction efforts – decrease the likelihood of conflict and – should conflict occur – decrease the potential destructiveness of conflict.

Answers to the questions of "Why arms control?", "What forms of arms control?", "What role to China?" and "How to engage with China?", I hope to hear during the next 70 minutes. I look very much forward to the discussion among our experts and the following Q&A session.

I am delighted to welcome our distinguished speakers – here in-person and online. Welcome, Dr Oliver Meier, Professor Michael Staack, and Dr Tong Zhao. Thank you for joining us for this important discussion. Our speakers will shortly be introduced in detail by our moderator, Dr Linda Maduz.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to all our guests in the audience, in this room and online. Welcome, and thank you for coming.

With this, I would like to hand it over to Mr Hajo Lanz, Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Geneva Office – and I would like to thank him once more for the excellent partnership in organising this Geneva Security Dialogue.