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Arms Control

# Europe's Role in Promoting US-China Arms Control Cooperation

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February 2022





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**Cover photo source:**

[U.S. Department of State](#)

February 2022

HCSS has received funding within the PROGRESS research framework agreement and has commissioned the author to draft this paper. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should it be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

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As the US-China strategic rivalry grows, the two countries face challenges to start arms control cooperation by themselves. However, their lack of capacity to manage the intensifying arms competition between themselves would have global implications. The negative impact on global stability would affect the security of European countries who find themselves caught in the battle between the two big powers. That said, European countries are key strategic players that both Washington and Beijing want to win the support of. They have influence and could play a useful role in promoting potential US-China arms control cooperation. The following sections discuss how European countries can engage with China at both the top leadership level and the operational levels and identify areas where Europe can help facilitate US-China communications on arms control issues. They offer technical suggestions on near-term risk reduction measures and longer-term steps to build capacity, in addition to potential diplomatic moves to raise attention and highlight common interests.

## The Nature of US-China Arms Race

The growing US-China rivalry in recent years does not appear to be purely the result of struggles between a rising power and an incumbent power during a transition of power. As China reinforces its traditional ideologies, strengthens domestic control, and explicitly rejects Western values and democratic systems under its current political leadership, the United States increases its pressure on China over issues of human rights, democracy, rule of law, and rules based international order. The Chinese government dismisses such Western values promoted by Washington and worries about a growing US intent to undermine and eventually overthrow China's ruling party and its political system. Beijing's comprehensive military modernization, including its nuclear buildup and systematic enhancement of conventional military capabilities across the board, serves as the ultimate guarantee that Washington can do nothing to interfere in Chinese efforts to defend its perceived core interests—domestic and international—and that the US has no choice but to accept peaceful co-existence with China under its current political system.

The ideological competition is a fundamental driving force of the US-China political rivalry and arms competition. If left unresolved, technical-level efforts to promote arms control cooperation will face tremendous challenges. European countries may seek to mitigate this competition by encouraging the two sides to first acknowledge the significance of their divergent values and be willing to discuss them candidly. Some common understandings on the existence of universal values would go a long way to de-escalate the ideological competition. At this same time, Europe can also help with technical-level efforts to build safeguards around the US-China military competition and to manage its consequences.

## Top-Level Engagement on Cooperative Security

As China's decision-making power becomes increasingly concentrated under the paramount leader, his personal support—even only symbolic—of the idea of seeking cooperative security could help stimulate much needed domestic discussion and interest within the bureaucratic system. Top-level support, expressed through public or internal speeches and policy directives from the paramount leader or his close associates, is the most effective way to overcome strong bureaucratic inertia and deeply held traditional thinking on issues like transparency and verification—issues that are important for achieving arms control.

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European leaders' direct appeals in communications and meetings with their Chinese counterpart about the importance of jointly pursuing arms control and cooperative security could help generate top-level attention. To put the topic of arms control or cooperative security on an official meeting agenda, in and of itself, could motivate domestic preparations and policy research that would not otherwise take place.

## Role of US Allies in Achieving US-China Strategic Stability

Allies' interests are an important consideration for US nuclear and strategic security policy, in both the transatlantic and Asia Pacific regions. China attaches utmost importance to the US acceptance of a mutual vulnerability nuclear relationship with China and/or the US adoption of no first use (NFU) nuclear policy as a key pillar for achieving a stable bilateral nuclear relationship and as a potential key objective for future bilateral arms control talks. But US allies in East Asia, especially Japan, have real concerns about whether US-China strategic stability at the nuclear level—embodied by a US commitment to mutual vulnerability or NFU—could undermine the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence and embolden Chinese military aggressiveness at the conventional level against regional countries. Beijing's recent nuclear buildup creates additional concerns about the implications of China's expanding nuclear power for regional security at both the nuclear and conventional level. China, on the other hand, dismisses such concerns and attributes the US hesitance toward mutual vulnerability and NFU entirely to Washington's "hegemonic" intent to achieve "absolute security."<sup>1</sup>

Given many European countries' long-standing security struggles with the Soviet Union/Russia and given China's deep distrust of the US and its Asian allies like Japan, European countries could provide a more credible and persuasive third-party's perspective to their Chinese interlocutors about the concerns of the US' Asian allies. For instance, they could help explain why the expressed security anxieties of countries like Japan could be genuine and why it would be in China's interests to ensure its neighboring countries' security concerns are adequately addressed. China's willingness to pursue a cooperative security framework with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other US allies in the Asia Pacific would be critical to regional peace and US-China strategic stability. Specifically, China's provision of conventional-level security assurances to these countries would help reduce some of countries' opposition against the US acknowledgment of a mutual nuclear vulnerability relationship with China—something Chinese experts believe as critically important for maintaining US-China strategic stability.<sup>2</sup> European countries have a stake in promoting this outcome too. If they could help China better appreciate the need for taking concrete measures to respond to the international concerns about regional security and rules-based order, including the security of sea lines of communication during both peacetime and times of tension, European countries would have less need to have their military vessels conduct freedom of navigation and other operations to protect their interests in that region.

1 Hu, Gaochen (胡高辰). "Negative Nuclear Concept Prevails, U.S. Considers 'No First Use' Concept Harmful (消极核观念盛行, 美认为“不首先使用”核武观念有害)." *The Paper* (澎湃新闻), May 9, 2020.

2 Wang, Amber. "China's Nuclear Threat Only Keeping up with Us Advances, Chinese Experts Say." *South China Morning Post*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3152855/chinas-nuclear-threat-only-keeping-us-advances-chinese-experts>

European countries could provide a more credible and persuasive third-party's perspective



## Sponsor Substantive Expert-Level Dialogues

China's hesitance toward arms control talks seems partly due to its perception that an equitable arms control agreement is infeasible at this moment because of issues such as capability asymmetry between China and the other major nuclear powers in terms of the size and composition of their nuclear arsenals. However, proposals of concrete and specific arms control models can help address these concerns. International experts have already made a few specific proposals about arms control options in this regard. For example, one of the suggestions is to subject the total numbers of all ground-launched missile launchers with ranges in excess of 500km, all SLBM launchers, and all heavy bombers under one central limit to address the capability asymmetry problem.<sup>3</sup> There are also suggestions to jointly ban the deployment of space-based missile defense interceptors, or to establish a US-China fissile material management system to build confidence that civilian nuclear facilities would not play a role in producing fissile materials for nuclear weapon programs.<sup>4</sup> If thoroughly examined, these proposals could help relevant governments identify ways to start working together.

In addition to proposals to contain arms race there are also specific ideas to help reduce risks of nuclear use. One example is the suggestion to implement a keep-out zone for satellites in high-altitude orbits to ensure the security of nuclear command, control, and communication assets in outer space.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese government has also expressed a clear interest to discuss issues such as risk reduction and potential measures to manage the impact of new military technologies such as outer space technologies and artificial intelligence.<sup>6</sup> One of the sources of nuclear risk is the increasing entanglement between nuclear and non-nuclear technologies. China's development and deployment of conventional-nuclear dual-capable ballistic missile systems, for example, has drawn international concerns about entanglement and the associated risk of inadvertent escalation of crisis. But the hostile US-China relationship has created difficulties to conduct bilateral expert-level discussions directly, without which it would be difficult to build common understandings about the risks and to explore potential mitigating measures. European countries, on the other hand, are in a better position to sponsor such expert exchanges. European research institutes or think tanks could organize multilateral Track II level workshops where European, Chinese, and American experts would jointly examine arms control challenges and study the technical and policy feasibility of various specific arms control models and crisis prevention options. Invitations to such multilateral expert exchanges from European institutes would not be too politically difficult for Chinese and American experts to accept. European experts could also share their rich experiences and insights on confidence-building and arms control practices in these joint explorations.

3 See, for example, Zhao, Tong. "Opportunities for Nuclear Arms Control Engagement with China." *Arms Control Today* 50, no. 1 (2020): 9-12. A more detailed (and slightly different) proposal is from Acton, James M., Thomas Macdonald, and Pranay Vaddi. "Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control: A Comprehensive Approach." Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2021, pp. 79-96.

4 Acton, James M., Thomas Macdonald, and Pranay Vaddi. "Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control: A Comprehensive Approach." Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2021, pp. 47-52, 71-78.

5 Acton, James M., Thomas Macdonald, and Pranay Vaddi. "Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control: A Comprehensive Approach." Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2021, pp. 61-70.

6 Fu, Cong (傅聪). "Maintain Global Strategic Stability and Reduce Risks of Nuclear Conflicts: Speech by Fu Cong, Director General of Arms Control Department of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, at the 16th Piic Arms Control Conference (维护全球战略稳定, 减少核冲突风险——外交部军控司司长傅聪在第十六届北京军控研讨会上的讲话)." Shen Zhen, October 16, 2019; "Department of Arms Control and Disarmament Holds Briefing for International Arms Control and Disarmament Issues." Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/t1795979.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1795979.shtml); "Statement by Director-General Fu Cong at the Eu Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference." Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/t1832223.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1832223.shtml).

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## Europe's Role in Promoting Multilateral Arms Control Diplomacy

In recent years the official arms control exchanges among some of the major powers face the risk of degenerating into pretentious posturing and loudspeaker diplomacy. The rest of the international community—including European countries—need to hold the major powers accountable on their responsibility to engage in good faith arms control talks. This means greater willingness to call out inconsistent positions and behaviors on issues like transparency and arms control verification.

Recognizing the challenges of negotiating legally binding treaties in the near-term future, efforts by European governments and civil society organizations to promote multilateral discussions on norms and responsible behaviors in outer space, nuclear, cyber, and other military domains will contribute directly to the building of a rules-based international order. A unified European voice in insisting substantive engagement of the major powers in these discussions carries important weight.

Europe can further mobilize existing multilateral institutions to promote concrete progress. The Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation, for instance, includes a missile launch notification and transparency provision. To universalize, and potentially broaden, such a confidence-building measure is becoming much more important than before, as the major powers are in a spending spree to develop new, and sometimes exotic, missile technologies that will raise the risk of unpredictability, ambiguity, and misunderstandings. China has so far not adopted such confidence-building measures but its proclaimed commitment to multilateral diplomacy implies this is a potential area of future international engagement with China.<sup>7</sup>

## Long-Term Efforts to Build Capacity

Chinese security experts are generally less familiar than their American, Russian, and perhaps European counterparts with technical issues related to arms reduction and limitation agreements. The lack of deep understanding about verification and inspection methodologies and procedures, for example, contributes to Chinese experts' suspicion about the practicality, effectiveness, and fairness of arms control agreements.<sup>8</sup> It took decades for the United States and Russia to develop relevant technical capacity but the difficult political relationship today makes it hard for such a process to start between Washington and Beijing. European countries can contribute to Chinese capacity building in these areas. They can organize training programs and offer visiting scholarships at European education and research institutes to Chinese experts. European arms control research institutes can conduct more exchanges with their Chinese counterparts.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of possible Chinese deliberation about the Hague Code of Conduct, see, Bondaz, Antoine, Daniel Liu, and Emmanuelle Maitre. "The Hague Code of Conduct and China." Service européen pour l'action extérieure (SEAE); Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, September 2021. For a detailed proposal on engaging China on missile launch notification, see, Acton, James M, Thomas D MacDonald, and Pranay Vaddi. "Revamping Nuclear Arms Control: Five Near-Term Proposals." Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Zhao, Tong. "The Case for China's Participation in Trilateral Arms Control." In *Trilateral Arms Control? Perspectives from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing*, edited by Ulrich Kuhn, 68: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, 2020.

European arms control research institutes can conduct more exchanges with their Chinese counterparts

In recent years, due to restricted travels, tighter security regulations, systematic scrutiny of expert exchanges, and greater obstacles against the free flow of information, the American and Chinese security expert communities are increasingly decoupled. The epistemic community that played a role in containing US-Soviet arms race during the Cold War is not working effectively between the United States and China and continues to erode. The European expert community is in a relatively more neutral and easier position than its American counterpart to maintain communication and exchanges with the Chinese expert community. Chinese officials and experts have been traditionally active in participating in conferences and meetings in Europe on international arms control and cooperative security issues. Although direct European-Chinese interactions in these areas are still quite limited, the potential for further growth is significant.

## There is almost no discussion about arms control issues among the Chinese general public

At the societal level, there is almost no discussion about arms control issues among the Chinese general public and no civil society players in this area whereas the public support for national defense investment and military modernization appears to be exceptionally high. As Chinese officials—including officials responsible for arms control policies—appear to respond more to domestic public opinion than to international public opinion,<sup>9</sup> the apparent lack of a societal base for proactive arms control policy has important implications. This is not a problem unique to China, but it presents a challenge to global arms control efforts. European countries can highlight at international fora—such as the upcoming Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference—the responsibility of all governments to raise public awareness of arms control issues among their domestic populations. In recent years, some European governments and many European civil society organizations have played a leadership role in raising public awareness of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and in setting public expectations about responsible government policy on nuclear weapons. Such public awareness would also be helpful to contain nationalistic fervor over nuclear weapons in other places including in China. European countries would be in a good position to call attention to the special responsibility of the governments of the Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) to actively raise public awareness about nuclear dangers and the importance of arm control and disarmament by, for example, sponsoring education programs for civil servants and the general public, as part of the NWS' legal obligations under NPT to pursue disarmament in good faith. At the end of the day, the very skeptical and dismissive public opinion toward arms control reduces government incentive to engage in substantive arms control cooperation and requires a systematic effort to make a change. European countries can help promote an international consensus that national governments have a responsibility to create conditions for and ensure the protection of free domestic public discussion and debate on nuclear and arms control issues.

9 Conrad, Jennifer. "China's Nationalistic 'Wolf Warriors' Blast Foes on Twitter." *Wired*, July 10, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/chinas-nationalistic-wolf-warriors-blast-foes-twitter/>



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