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China Can Help Cut Nukes

By Richard Weitz

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In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama pledged to seek a world without nuclear weapons. But while he delivered on his promise to negotiate the New START with Russia a year later, progress has stalled. To break the deadlock, the current bilateral framework for negotiation, which has remained largely unchanged since the Cold War, must be transformed into a trilateral framework that includes China.

To be sure, such a move would significantly complicate negotiations. After all, while decades of bilateral dialogue have given the U.S. and Russia a good sense of each other's strategic perspectives, China's perception of strategic stability is unfamiliar. But trilateral dialogues could also serve as an opportunity to manage the countries' strategic relations, which currently are characterized by mistrust.

Russia seeks China's support in opposing U.S. missile defense systems and calls for the involvement of all nuclear states in future strategic arms control talks. Russia also cites concerns about China's military modernization to justify its refusal to negotiate with NATO on reducing its tactical nuclear weapons. China, which has never adopted legally binding

limits on its nuclear weapons or strategic nuclear-delivery vehicles, rejects Russia's call to join negotiations.

At the same time, U.S. officials deny that their country's missile defense programs are directed against Russia or China but refuse to offer a legally binding guarantee. Meanwhile, the U.S. Defense Department is developing a robust program of long-range conventional strike weapons, which China and Russia cite to justify their efforts to strengthen their offensive nuclear forces.

Although multilateral cooperation on nuclear issues has been effective in some cases, such as in ratifying the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, it has been inadequate in others, such as in easing tensions with Iran and North Korea.

For example, the three countries' policies are inadvertently contributing to proliferation pressures in Asia and Europe. U.S. pledges to defend Japan against a nuclear attack from China or North Korea have played a decisive role in dissuading the Japanese from seeking their own nuclear weapons. Given this, a Chinese nuclear surge could undermine the credibility of U.S. deterrence commitments, possibly motivating Japan to initiate its own nuclear program.

Similarly, some of NATO's newer members, many of which are former Soviet-bloc states, are anxious about the prospect of Russian rearmament. As a result, they oppose efforts to reduce the number of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons located in Europe, part of NATO's "nuclear sharing" policy.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to initiating a trilateral dialogue is Chinese resistance to formal nuclear arms control agreements, which is rooted in the memory of Cold War-era nonproliferation initiatives aimed partly at preventing China from developing its own nuclear deterrent. Since then, Chinese officials have insisted that they do not belong in U.S.-Russian strategic-arms talks since the two countries' nuclear arsenals dwarf theirs.

But as the U.S. and Russia reduce their nuclear arms, this excuse is becoming less valid, and China's exclusion from negotiations is becoming a significant hindrance to disarmament. Securing a binding commitment from China's government to limit its nuclear development is crucial to reassuring the U.S. and Russia that further strategic-weapons cuts will not undermine global or regional stability.

Several recent developments could help to minimize obstacles to trilateral cooperation. China's new leadership is further removed from Maoist-era, reflexive opposition to nuclear negotiations. Russian leaders' confidence in their economic and military resurgence is waning, and both countries are increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress in nuclear talks with North Korea and Iran. Meanwhile, faced with a large federal budget deficit, many U.S. voters would welcome reduced spending on nuclear weapons.

The U.S. should capitalize on this situation, leveraging Russian concerns, to induce China to join strategic arms control efforts. China might be willing to make a unilateral commitment not to augment its nuclear arsenal if Russia and the U.S. reduce theirs further. Determining the circumstances that might induce such restraint is crucial to reinvigorating nuclear disarmament efforts.

With Russia on board, it is up to the U.S. to initiate a transformation in the nuclear-negotiation framework, which means convincing China to participate.

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