



ANALYSIS

WHY THE DEEP NUCLEAR REDUCTIONS MOVEMENT SHOULD FOCUS ON RUSSIA AND CHINA

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Introduction

Russia's and China's revisionist military strategies, supported by their rapidly expanding nuclear arsenals, are reversing a decades-long decline in the overall number of nuclear weapons in the world. Only 15 years ago, four eminent U.S. statesmen wrote an article titled "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons" that called on states abandon nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes.¹ Then, two years later, activists' hopes rose even higher as U.S. President Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his "vision of a world free of nuclear weapons."² President Obama's 2009 "Prague Speech" and 2010 signing of the New START arms control treaty brought hopes of steep nuclear reductions to a crescendo. Since then, however, stock in nuclear reductions has mirrored the experience of a character in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, who, when asked how he went bankrupt responded, "Gradually, then suddenly."

As Russia and China are primarily responsible for the sudden and dramatic reversal in the hopes of nuclear reduction proponents, one would expect that they would focus their criticisms on Moscow and Beijing—and yet, that is not the case. Instead, their statements continue to accuse all nuclear-weapons powers equally, or perhaps Russia and the United States especially as the largest nuclear powers, of actively working against their obligations to reduce their nuclear stockpiles.

Yet, if advocates for deep nuclear reductions hope to ever reach their goal, then they must adapt their strategy to focus their criticism on those states that are most placing the prospect of nuclear reductions at risk: Russia and China. Specifically, this article contends that nuclear reduction proponents should concentrate their efforts on creating the political and diplomatic conditions in Russia and China that would necessarily precede any attempts of broader nuclear disarmament—a departure from their current strategy of advocating for nuclear reductions regardless of political realities.

In short, proponents of nuclear reductions and realists both agree that a fundamental, and perhaps systematic, change in the political environment toward enduring and benign ends is a necessary precondition for nuclear disarmament. Realists part ways by deprecating the goal of nuclear disarmament, and certainly think its likelihood is out of reach, but can

¹ George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116787515251566636>.

² "The Nobel Peace Prize 2009" *NobelPrize.org*, 2009, available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/summary/>.



applaud attempts to encourage positive changes towards peaceful ends in Russia's and China's political systems, values, and policies.³

This article proceeds by first explaining why fundamental political changes are a prerequisite to steep nuclear reductions. By extension, nuclear reductions in and of themselves do not cause peace or reduce political tensions. Thus, if proponents of deep nuclear reductions hope to achieve their goal, they must focus on transforming the destructive political aims of the states that most endanger the hopes of nuclear reductions at this time. The article concludes by expounding on the many ways that, if one adopts the perspective of a nuclear reductions proponent, no two states have done more in the past decade to increase nuclear risks and decimate chances for nuclear reductions than Russia and China. The conclusion is obvious, revisionist political systems like Russia and China will continue frustrating the hopes of major nuclear reductions, and justifying the retention of nuclear arsenals by status quo powers, unless and until the internal and external political incentive structures change for the better in Moscow and Beijing. On this point, nuclear reduction proponents and realists should agree, but given the deep-seated strategic cultures of Russia and China, it is unknown whether that agreement would be enough to induce the necessary political transformation.

The Primacy of Politics

One of the few areas of agreement between proponents of major nuclear reductions and realists is their belief that there must be a fundamental transformation of political relations in the world before states can achieve nuclear disarmament. Although nuclear disarmament proponents often prefer to set aside the more difficult political questions of sovereignty, authority, and enforcement, in favor of more achievable technical questions of feasibility (safeguards, portal monitoring, etc.), even their writings acknowledge the necessity of changed political dynamics. For example, Stephen Young of the Union of Concerned Scientists wrote recently, "... the world needs to eliminate nuclear weapons. It will not happen quickly, and the *world would have to develop a new, truly stabilizing security regime* to replace the current system built upon nuclear deterrence, but that effort should be the focus of international efforts moving forward."⁴ (Emphasis added)

Or, as George Perkovich and James Acton of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace wrote, "[Nuclear-armed states] will not be able to collectively envisage a prohibition of nuclear weapons until conflicts centring [sic] on Taiwan, Kashmir, Palestine and (perhaps) the Russian periphery are resolved, or at least durably stabilized. These are questions of unsettled sovereignty involving states that regard them as essentially internal disputes and which retain nuclear weapons, at least in part, to prevent them from being settled by force

³ For more on the realist and utopian divide in nuclear strategy, see Keith B. Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020).

⁴ Stephen Young, "The Age of Predatory Nuclear-Weapon States Has Arrived," *Politico*, September 30, 2022, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/09/30/putins-nuclear-threats-towards-ukraine-00059571>.

against their interests.”⁵ Stated more explicitly, the process of nuclear abolition depends on countries with essentially irreconcilable political goals resolving their disputes on an enduring basis. This fundamental problem extends even into a world where political disputes have been resolved, but the potential for future disputes and nuclear breakout looms. Perkovich and Acton conclude, “... enforcement would essentially depend on relations among major powers.”⁶ Again, constructive and non-revisionist political aims are the key to steep nuclear reductions.

On this point, most realists would agree. The bipartisan Congressionally-mandated Strategic Posture Commission wrote in its final report in 2009: “The conditions that might make the elimination of nuclear weapons possible are not present today and establishing such conditions would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order.”⁷ Former Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Strategic Posture Commission, William J. Perry, further emphasized this point in his preface for the report, stating: “All of the commission members believe that reaching the ultimate goal of global nuclear elimination would require a fundamental change in geopolitics. Indeed, if the vision of nuclear elimination is thought of as the ‘top of the mountain,’ it is clear that it cannot be seen at this time.”⁸

Yet, even while nuclear disarmament proponents and realists agree that a fundamental political transformation is necessary for disarmament, they are split in their views on whether and how that transformation can occur. Perkovich and Acton cite approvingly a concept by U.K. professor William Walker called a “co-evolutionary” process, in which smaller steps on the dual tracks of nuclear reductions and political reconciliation aid and reinforce each other.⁹ According to this line of thinking, nuclear weapons reductions are both the cause and effect of decreased political tensions, and vice versa.

Realists, by contrast, are more likely to believe that nuclear weapons reductions are more likely to be the result of decreased political tensions or reconciliation, not their cause.¹⁰

⁵ George Perkovich and James M. Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2008), *Adelphi Paper* # 396, pp. 27-28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷ William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger, Chairman and Vice-Chairman, *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), p. 17, available at https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/America's_Strategic_Posture_Auth_Ed.pdf.

⁸ William J. Perry, “Chairman’s Preface,” as seen in, William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger, Chairman and Vice-Chairman, *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), p. xi, available at https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/America's_Strategic_Posture_Auth_Ed.pdf.

⁹ Perkovich and Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁰ For the sake of the completeness of the discussion, it should be noted that the U.K. “food-for-thought” paper for the 2020 NPT Review Conference does not choose between political reconciliation preceding or happening in conjunction with nuclear disarmament, only noting that both are possibilities. See, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *Getting to a World Without Nuclear Weapons: A Food-for-Thought Paper* (New York: United Nations, December 10, 2021), p. 3, available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/387/95/PDF/N2138795.pdf?OpenElement>.

Winston Churchill summarized realist thought on this topic with his pithy observation, “It is the greatest mistake to mix up disarmament with peace. When you have peace you will have disarmament.”¹¹ According to the realist view, therefore, the broader political context is a better indicator for the prospects of nuclear reductions than a period of reduced political tensions which often is followed by a period of renewed tensions.

Even a cursory review of the history of nuclear arms control indicates that the realist perspective hews closest to reality. For instance, when Richard Nixon became president, he and Henry Kissinger pursued a strategy of relaxing tensions with the Soviet Union, a policy later termed “détente,” though they generally tried initially to avoid using the word.¹² Out of détente arose the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) interim agreement and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 1972. But while improved political relations created the conditions necessary for SALT, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan helped scuttle the prospects of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks II (SALT II) in 1979. Additionally, Mikhail Gorbachev, who explicitly sought improved relations with the United States, rose to head the Soviet Union in 1985 and aided the negotiation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed in 1987. And, as a final example of the prerequisite for improved political relations preceding nuclear reductions, the current Russian escalation of its war against Ukraine has caused the United States to cease its arms control discussions with Russia.

Additionally, some historical examples act as a counterpoint to the belief that nuclear reductions and improved political relations are likely to work together. In short, entering into nuclear arms control agreements is not necessarily indicative of improved political relationships. For instance, President Reagan sought arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union during his first term, even as he condemned severely the Soviet political model and policies. Or, to broaden the point beyond nuclear arms control, entering into conventional arms control treaties does not guarantee the participants are necessarily seeking political reconciliation—as demonstrated by an example from the 1921-1922 Washington Naval Conference, which limited capital ship tonnage. As the foremost historian of the 20th century Japanese navy, Sadao Asada, has written, “A supreme irony of the Washington treaty was that Japan’s National Defense Policy adopted the idea of inevitable war [with the United States] precisely when that treaty had reduced the Japanese and American navies so that neither could conduct offensive operations.”¹³ In this instance, Japan used arms control to improve its military prospects against its political rival, the United States.

¹¹ Winston Churchill, “Foreign Office,” *Parliament.UK*, July 13, 1934, available at https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1934/jul/13/foreignoffice#S5CV0292P0_19340713_HOC_68.

¹² H. W. Brands, “The World in a Word: The Rise and Fall of Détente,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 48-50.

¹³ Sadao Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), p. 102.

Why Should Proponents of Steep Nuclear Reductions Focus on Russia and China?

Having established that improved political relations is the most likely catalyst for nuclear weapons reductions, and setting aside quite formidable realist doubts about the feasibility of the goal at this point in time, the question becomes: how should proponents of steep nuclear reductions react? If improved political relations are the prerequisite for major nuclear reductions, then how should that change their current strategy? Presently, nuclear reduction proponents issue blanket condemnations of all nuclear weapon-possessing states—often placing special onus on the United States and Russia as the two largest nuclear powers and, thus, the states with the greatest obligation to lead on disarmament.¹⁴

The obvious downside to this strategy is that categorizing states as “nuclear haves” and “nuclear have-nots” essentially erases the fundamental differences between the nuclear policies and practices of the United States and Russia, and the United States and China. From the perspective of non-nuclear states, this categorization appears on its face to be appealing—but, based on history, the far more salient categorization for nuclear reductions is the divide between revisionist and status quo powers. States with revisionist political aims are more likely to cause fears among status quo powers about potential conflict, thus justifying their retention of nuclear weapons as a deterrent. Or, revisionist states may engage in conflict with status quo states, causing the prospects for major nuclear reductions to decline as well. If a stable and benign political environment is the prerequisite for major nuclear reductions, then it stands to reason that the greatest threat to major nuclear reductions are those states that most threaten a stable and benign political environment.

And, today, which states pose the greatest threat to a stable and benign political environment? Russia and China. In fact, there are four ways Russia and China have caused the greatest harm to the prospects for major nuclear reductions, each of which is examined in more detail below. First, China has harmed the prospects for steep nuclear reductions by refusing to participate in any meaningful dialogue with the United States on nuclear issues. Second, Russia has violated multiple arms control treaties, including those focused on nuclear weapons. Third, Russia and China have maintained revisionist political aims against their neighbors and engage in violence or threats of violence to achieve those aims. Fourth, Russia and China have rapidly increased their nuclear arsenals at a time when the general worldwide trend bent towards decreasing nuclear arsenals.

To begin, China has not engaged in any substantive discussions with the United States about even the most fundamental topics concerning its nuclear weapons policy or doctrine. Despite repeated U.S. invitations to begin such talks, Chinese officials have closely followed their preferred policy of opacity regarding issues like the size of their nuclear weapons

¹⁴ See, for example the recent joint statement of 37 non-government entities: *The Necessity of a Meaningful Action Plan on Article VI of the NPT* (New York: Reaching Critical Will, August 5, 2022), available at https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/statements/5Aug_ArticleVI_joint.pdf.

stockpile, nuclear employment principles, and modernization goals. China's refusal to discuss these and other issues has grown even more consequential in recent years as public evidence of China's stunning nuclear expansion continues to mount.¹⁵ Proponents of steep nuclear reductions should be especially concerned about China's long-standing practice of refusing to engage with the United States on basic issues concerning nuclear weapons because there appears to be little international pressure on China to change its actions—thus risking, from the perspective of a proponent of nuclear reductions, a prevailing notion that intransigence on nuclear reductions has no costs.

Russia, for its part, threatens the prospects for major nuclear reductions, such as they are, with its inveterate compulsion to violate arms control agreements, including those focused on restricting nuclear arsenal sizes. For instance, Russia violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and refused to return to compliance, resulting in the termination of the INF Treaty.¹⁶ The United States also has concerns about Russia's adherence to a number of other nuclear and non-nuclear related agreements, including the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, the nuclear testing moratoria, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Biological Weapons Convention, the Vienna Document, and the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty.¹⁷ Among the most recent concerning developments is Russia's refusal to allow New START Treaty inspections to resume.¹⁸ These actions are especially detrimental to the cause of major nuclear reductions because the nature of Russia's violations and non-adherence to agreements is often connected with its pursuit of its revisionist political aims in Europe and elsewhere.

Russia and China also damage the prospects for major nuclear reductions by committing themselves to revisionist political and military policies, especially concerning neighboring states. Russia, in just the past two decades, has invaded Georgia in 2008, invaded Ukraine in 2014, and more recently, greatly expanded its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. China, for its part, has not renounced the use of force against Taiwan and regularly states that any Taiwan-related issue is an internal affair that precludes outside intervention. China also claims "sovereignty" over much of the South China Sea, generating conflicting claims with Brunei,

¹⁵ For more on China and the NPT, see Thomas D. Grant, *China's Nuclear Buildup and Article VI NPT: Legal Text and Strategic Challenge* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy), *Occasional Paper*, Vol 1, No. 11, November 2021, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Grant-OP-for-web.pdf>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, August 2019), pp. 11-20, available at <https://2017-2021.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Compliance-Report-2019-August-19-Unclassified-Final.pdf>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-52, and, U.S. Department of State, *Compliance with the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling, and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, Condition (10)(c) Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, April 2022), pp. 16-22, available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Condition-10-c-Report.pdf>.

¹⁸ "Russia Suspends START Arms Inspections over U.S. Travel Curbs," *Reuters*, August 8, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-tells-us-it-is-suspending-inspections-under-start-weapons-treaty-2022-08-08/>. For analysis on the significance of this action, see Mark Schneider, *Trust Without Verification: The Wrong Approach to Arms Control* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, September 1, 2022), *Information Series #532*, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/IS-532.pdf>.

the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam.¹⁹ These conflicting claims are in addition to the ongoing Sino-Indian tensions, and occasional fighting, over their disputed borders. To restate the obvious, Russia's and China's revisionist political and military policies, some of which are aimed at nuclear-armed states or their allies, are wholly detrimental to the cause of steep nuclear reductions because they perpetuate the perception (or reality, according to realists) that Russia and China pose existential threats to others, thus justifying the retention of nuclear weapons.

Finally, although not discussed, it is worth noting that Russia's and China's expansive nuclear buildups began at a time when, according to proponents of major nuclear reductions, the world was the closest it has been to global zero numerically since the 1950s.²⁰ In other words, Russia and China started their nuclear expansions in earnest just when worldwide stockpiles of nuclear weapons had reached their lowest point in over 60 years. When combined with Russia's and China's other actions described above, it should be clear that the greatest threats to major nuclear reductions—as perceived by its proponents—should not be all nuclear-weapon possessing states without distinction, but rather, those states whose policies and practices are most inimical to political stability and peace: Russia and China.

Conclusion

U.N. Secretary General António Guterres may have spoken better than he knew when he said recently, “Nuclear weapons are a global scourge. A deadly reminder of countries’ inability to solve problems through dialogue and collaboration.”²¹ Guterres meant for this remark to chastise nuclear weapon states into doing something he believes is possible, solving problems through “dialogue and collaboration.” But Guterres inadvertently revealed that nuclear weapons themselves are not the problem, rather, incompatible political aims are the problem, and nuclear weapons continuing to exist is simply another manifestation of enduring political rivalries.

On this point, the contemporary divide between proponents of major nuclear reductions and realists is clear, the former believes incompatible political aims are a problem that can be solved, on an enduring basis while realists agree with the eminent strategist Colin S. Gray, that, “... Americans imbued culturally with a determination not to tolerate unsolved problems can have severe difficulty distinguishing among problems which can be solved,

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, November 2021), p. 15, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

²⁰ For the underlying data on worldwide nuclear stockpile totals, see, Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945-2013,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 69, No. 5 (2013), p. 78.

²¹ António Guterres, “Secretary-General’s video message to the Opening of the First Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *United Nations*, June 21, 2022, available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2022-06-21/secretary-general%E2%80%99s-video-message-the-opening-of-the-first-meeting-of-states-parties-the-treaty-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons>.

[and] problems which really are conditions and hence cannot be solved soon (if ever)...”²² The fundamental disagreement between proponents of steep nuclear reductions and realists, therefore, is whether incompatible political aims are a problem to be solved or a condition to be mitigated.

This article began with the observation that both proponents of major nuclear reductions and realists can agree that a fundamental transformation of the political system is necessary for nuclear disarmament, even if realists believe that goal of nuclear disarmament is infeasible and would be imprudent. Where both sides part ways is on the question of whether the political transformation can happen in conjunction with major nuclear reductions, or whether the political transformation must precede major nuclear reductions. History, however, indicates that the political context is a controlling factor in whether states consider negotiated reductions in nuclear weapons feasible and desirable—thus supporting the realist position.

With this in mind, proponents of major nuclear reductions should cease their current strategy of issuing blanket condemnations of all nuclear weapon possessing states without distinctions, and instead focus on those states that most harm the prospects for major nuclear reductions, that is, those states that most upset the prospects for political stability and peace, namely, Russia and China. This is not to say that proponents of major nuclear reductions should never discuss the United States, the United Kingdom, or France, only that such discussion (particularly the constant criticism of U.S. nuclear policy) distracts from the actual core problem facing the prospect of major nuclear reductions: revisionist great powers armed with expanding nuclear arsenals. Although realists will see the goal of major nuclear reductions as folly in the contemporary political environment, they can at least applaud a shift in the strategy of proponents of nuclear reduction proponents towards focusing their efforts on calling out the revisionist political aims of Russia and China and pressing them towards more benign ends. Only the future can record whether such a strategy will bear more fruit than current efforts, but at least such endeavors will proceed based on political realities, instead of, as former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger wrote, “indulging in pieties.”²³

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²² Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 48-49.

²³ James R. Schlesinger, *Arms Interactions and Arms Control* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, September 1968), p. 21, available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P3881.html>.