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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Beijing is refining its nuclear and technology policy

On 27 November, China released a new white paper on arms control, the first such document in twenty years, clarifying how it wishes to be perceived in the current global security environment.

The white paper, titled "China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era", is the first comprehensive review of China's arms policy after a two-decade pause.

At a time when relations between the great powers are deteriorating month by month, Beijing has decided to present in one place its views on nuclear weapons, missile development, and biological and chemical agreements, as well as areas that until recently were not covered by global rules – space, cyber security, and artificial intelligence.

The release is very carefully timed. China has placed the document within a broader political framework, noting that 2025 marks eight decades since the end of the Second World War and the founding of the United Nations.

This gives the message additional weight: Beijing wants to convey that it is not acting as a force undermining existing rules but as a state claiming to protect the foundations of the order established after 1945.

This is a significant narrative shift from accusations that China is rapidly expanding its nuclear and missile arsenal and seeking to alter the balance in the Indo-Pacific.

No-first-use

In the introduction, the document clearly states that the world is entering a period of greater risks.

It cites regional wars, weakening international agreements, technological races, and a growing rift between the great powers.

This is the starting point from which China builds its policy rationale: as the environment deteriorates and negotiations between the US and Russia have practically stalled, Beijing believes it must develop its own responses to these new challenges.

The most important part of the white paper concerns China's approach to nuclear weapons.

Beijing reaffirms its no-first-use (NFU) of nuclear weapons policy. This policy applies without exception. It is explicitly stated that China will not resort to nuclear weapons unless it is itself attacked with nuclear weapons.

This is one of the few principles from the Cold War period that China has retained since joining the group of nuclear powers.

Additionally, the document highlights that China will not issue nuclear threats to states that do not possess nuclear weapons.

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In this way, Beijing seeks to distinguish itself from other powers, which retain the option of earlier use of nuclear weapons in their doctrines.

The document does not deny that China's nuclear capabilities are being rapidly modernised.

The underlying message is clear: China is determined to surpass the technological level of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in light of the US, Russia, and other powers developing new generations of missiles, submarines, and ballistic systems.

However, Beijing maintains that the number of warheads and equipment remains within the limits of minimal deterrence.

This means that China does not seek to match the USA and Russia in numbers but to possess a capability that guarantees any opponent

would face unacceptable costs in the event of an attack.

This stance is in clear conflict with Western analyses, which estimate that the number of Chinese missile silos and missiles has increased drastically in recent years.

The white paper simply omits this issue. It adheres to a political framework in which China presents itself as a power that only reacts to external pressures.

The UN as the foundation for stability

One of the most interesting elements of the document is the call for other nuclear powers to accept the common no-first-use principle.

China first presented this idea in the 1990s but is now promoting it at a time when the global arms control system is visibly in crisis.

Beijing states that the five member states of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)—the US, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France could pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons.

China offers this as a way to reduce tensions. However, it recognises that this is politically almost impossible, as the US and France have doctrines that rely on the possibility of an early nuclear response.

Thus, the document serves a dual function: it formally offers cooperation while essentially shifting responsibility to others, portraying them as powers unwilling to accept restrictions.

China's white paper then addresses other areas of weaponry and international commitments.

> China believes the international system, with the UN playing a key role, remains the foundation for stability

It lists agreements signed or ratified by China, including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention.

The document asserts that Beijing respects all obligations under these regimes and encourages a balance between disarmament, limited proliferation, and the peaceful use of technologies.

It also emphasises that China believes the international system, with the UN playing a key role, remains the foundation for stability.

This section responds to accusations that China is using its state-owned companies and technology projects to strengthen its military and industrial capabilities outside existing rules.

An entirely new category on the global agenda

The key change is the focus on areas that, until a decade ago, were not central topics on the global agenda.

Space, cyberspace, and artificial intelligence now form an entirely new category in the document.

China's position on space is based on the claim that the international community must establish binding rules to prevent the placement of weapons in orbit and limit the testing of systems designed to destroy satellites.

Beijing justifies this by citing the need to avoid an arms race in a domain that is becoming crucial for commercial and military activities.

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At the same time, China is developing its own capabilities to disrupt, disable, or destroy enemy satellites, which makes this position a source of suspicion among Western countries.

The situation is similar in cyberspace. China argues that rules must be defined within the framework of the United Nations, as it believes that standards promoted by Western countries are shaped by political interests rather than neutral security assessments.

According to this logic, developing countries remain in a subordinate position and accept norms in whose creation they did not participate.

Security challenges in the environment

In the section concerning missiles and anti-missile defence, China's frustration with the development of American systems in the Indo-Pacific is evident.

Beijing believes that the deployment of the US THAAD system (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense – an anti-missile system designed to intercept ballistic missiles at high altitudes) in South Korea, as well as the development of the Aegis Ashore system (land-based versions of the US naval anti-missile shield, based on vertical launchers and high-power radars), disrupts the balance in the region.

The Chinese argument is that the radars of these systems can monitor deep into Chinese territory and thus affect its deterrence capability.

Beijing seeks to justify the modernisation of its missile forces and an increase in the number of mobile and fixed launcher platforms

The document does not provide specific numbers or technical data, but it insists that China must have capabilities that match "security challenges in the environment."

With this, Beijing seeks to justify the modernisation of its missile forces and an increase in the number of mobile and fixed launcher platforms.

A response to external pressures, not a race for supremacy

This document should be regarded as a serious attempt by Beijing to take the political initiative in the field of arms control.

While Washington and Moscow struggle with the failure of one agreement after another, China is seeking to assert itself as a power offering order and stability.

Beijing has decided to publicly define its position and present it at a time when channels of communication between the great powers have been cut off or reduced to a minimum - Xi Jinping

This does not conceal its own modernisation, but the document makes clear how Beijing wishes to present that modernisation: as a

response to external pressures, not as part of a race for supremacy.

For countries monitoring global security, this is an important signal. China is not waiting for political circumstances to change in Washington or Moscow.

It is constructing the narrative and framework within which it wishes to discuss nuclear and technological security.

The question is how well the rest of the world will accept the Chinese version of the rules.

One thing is certain: Beijing has decided to publicly define its position and present it at a time when channels of communication between the great powers have been cut off or reduced to a minimum.

This is a move that will affect future negotiations, as no serious arms control discussion can take place without the Chinese position set out in this document.