



CENJOWS

WEB ARTICLE
WA/02/26

CHINA'S WHITE PAPER ON ARMS CONTROL IN THE NEW ERA: UNDERSTANDING A STRATEGIC SHIFT

MS ASHIKA S PRASAD



CENJOWS

**CHINA'S WHITE PAPER ON
ARMS CONTROL IN THE NEW
ERA: UNDERSTANDING A
STRATEGIC SHIFT**



**Ashika S Prasad is a
Research Assistant at
CENJOWS**

Introduction

China's State Council Information Office released an important White Paper titled "China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Non-proliferation in the New Era in November 2025."¹ This document outlines China's official stance on military strategy, peace, and controlling weapons. It is significant because it shows how China wants to influence global security rules moving forward. This is especially notable because China has not released a White Paper on arms control like this in 20 years.

This White Paper comes at a crucial time when global security is undergoing swift transformation. Modern technologies like AI, cyberspace weapons, and space-based systems are becoming even more critical than traditional nuclear weapons. China, through this document, talks about these new threats and presents its own vision on what the future rules should look like.² This article explains what China's White Paper says and what it means for countries like India and the wider world.

China's Nuclear Policy: The Foundation of Everything

The most important part of any arms control discussion involving China is its nuclear weapons policy. China has nuclear weapons, and how China manages these weapons affects global peace and security.

The No-First-Use Doctrine

A central pillar of China's nuclear strategy involves the commitment to refrain from initiating nuclear weapons employment in any conflict scenario. This doctrine, commonly referred to as "no-first-use," represents China's official pledge that nuclear weapons will be deployed only in response to a nuclear attack.³ China maintains that this commitment distinguishes its approach to nuclear deterrence from that of several other nuclear-weapon states, particularly the United States, which explicitly reserves the option of first nuclear employment under specified circumstances.⁴

The no-first-use policy functions as both a strategic declaration and a restraint mechanism. By committing to responsive rather than pre-emptive nuclear employment, China positions itself as a more cautious nuclear actor than certain other major powers. This positioning carries diplomatic implications, as it allows China to portray itself as a responsible nuclear custodian while simultaneously maintaining robust deterrent capabilities.

Nuclear Arsenal Restraint and Minimum Deterrence

China's White Paper articulates the position that the nation maintains its nuclear arsenal at the minimal level necessary to ensure effective deterrence.⁵ This minimum deterrence framework represents China's declared commitment to avoiding an unbounded nuclear arms competition. The document asserts that China has not engaged in nuclear arms races with other states and has historically exercised restraint in weapons development and deployment.⁶

To substantiate these claims, China references its historical conduct regarding nuclear testing and weapons production. The nation maintains that it conducted fewer nuclear tests than other major powers.⁷ China also notes the closure of nuclear weapons production facilities in significant locations, presenting these actions as evidence of its commitment to restraint rather than continuous weapons expansion.⁸ However,

external assessments by intelligence analysts and defence researchers present a more complex picture, suggesting that while China's nuclear arsenal remains smaller than those of the United States and Russia, China has nevertheless undertaken systematic modernisation and quantitative expansion of its nuclear capabilities.⁹

Progressive Nuclear Disarmament as a Long-Term Objective

The document identifies comprehensive global nuclear disarmament as China's ultimate objective in arms control policy.¹⁰ This formulation of China's disarmament commitment, however, incorporates significant qualifications regarding implementation timelines and prerequisites. China contends that meaningful nuclear disarmament must proceed through progressive stages and must be contingent upon the parallel actions of other nuclear-weapon states.¹¹

China particularly emphasises that states possessing the largest nuclear arsenals, notably the United States and Russia, should undertake the initial reductions in nuclear capabilities.¹² This position reflects China's argument that burden-sharing in disarmament efforts should be distributed according to the magnitude of each state's nuclear arsenal. China maintains that it cannot participate in arms reduction agreements that would constrain its capabilities while leaving larger arsenals of other powers substantially unaffected.

Arms Control Beyond Nuclear Weapons

What makes China's White Paper interesting is that it does not focus only on nuclear weapons. Instead, it discusses three important new areas that China says need international rules and controls: outer space, cyberspace, and artificial intelligence.¹³

The regulatory expansion proposed by China reflects recognition that technological advancement has created novel security challenges that existing arms control mechanisms do not adequately address. Contemporary security threats originating in cyber domains, space-based systems, and artificial intelligence applications fall outside traditional arms control regimes. China's inclusion of these domains in its comprehensive arms control White Paper positions China as a proponent of updated regulatory frameworks appropriate to twenty-first century technological realities.

China's White Paper says that outer space should be kept peaceful and not used for military weapons. The paper opposes the idea of putting weapons in space or using space-based systems to attack countries.¹⁴ This reflects China's concern that major powers, particularly the United States, might develop space-based weapons that would give them an unfair advantage.

The White Paper explains that China wants cyberspace to be governed by four principles: respect for national control over cyber systems, keeping peace and security in cyberspace, promoting cooperation and openness, and creating fair international rules.¹⁵ These principles suggest that China wants to resist international interference in its internet and digital systems while building international rules that apply equally to all countries.

AI is another important area discussed in the White Paper. It highlights the need to develop rules for how AI is used, especially in military contexts. Controlling the international regulation of AI could serve China's interests.¹⁶

China's Strategic Self-Presentation

An important part of the White Paper is how China describes itself. China says it is committed to 'peaceful development' and that it will never seek to control other countries or build military bases around the world.¹⁷ The peaceful development framework positions China as a status quo actor content with existing international arrangements rather than a revisionist power seeking to fundamentally alter global hierarchies.

However, some experts outside China point out that while China says it is peaceful, it is also rapidly expanding its military capabilities. For example, recent reports show that China is building more nuclear weapons and improving its military technology.¹⁸ This gap between what China says (peaceful development) and what it is actually doing (expanding military power) is something that observers around the world watch carefully.

India's Position on Arms Control and Its Relationship with China

India, like China, is a country with nuclear weapons that is not part of the major nuclear treaties that many other countries follow. India has an estimated 180 nuclear

warheads.¹⁹ India developed its nuclear weapons because it felt threatened by China's nuclear weapons and Pakistan's nuclear weapons. India, like China, maintains a no-first-use policy for its nuclear weapons.²⁰

India's position within international arms control discussions reflects a distinctive perspective shaped by its status as a non-aligned nation and its particular security circumstances. India has historically supported comprehensive global nuclear disarmament while simultaneously refusing to constrain its own nuclear capabilities through adherence to restrictive arms control agreements perceived as disadvantageous to Indian security interests.²¹

India's relationship with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) illuminates this complex positioning. India has declined to adhere to the NPT, arguing that the treaty's framework creates unjust differentiation among states by permitting certain nations to maintain nuclear arsenals while prohibiting others from acquiring such capabilities.²² India's refusal to join the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state reflects its determination to preserve strategic autonomy and retain nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes against China and Pakistan.

India articulated this position clearly in official statements, emphasising that any international disarmament regime must provide equitable treatment to all states and must not perpetuate permanent strategic hierarchies based on arbitrary divisions between nuclear "haves" and "have-nots."²³

India's Concerns About China's White Paper

While India has not officially commented deeply on China's White Paper, India's general positions on arms control suggest several concerns.²⁴ India is still doubtful of China's "peaceful" claims. Unsettled borders and China's massive military growth are the main reasons why. Things got much worse after the 2020 Galwan Valley fight, which showed just how pushy Beijing has become.

Moreover, India is trailing behind in areas like AI and cyber tech, making people worry about a power gap, especially if global rules end up favouring China. On the topic of weapons, India just wants a level playing field. They won't support rules that keep the current nuclear elite in power while holding back developing nations.

Challenges and Questions

Several important questions remain about China's White Paper and what it means:

- First, there is a question about honesty. The concern is whether China actually follow the policies it describes in the white paper, or whether it says one thing while doing another. For example, while the paper claims China keeps nuclear weapons to a minimum, intelligence reports suggest China is actually expanding its nuclear arsenal. This mismatch between policy and observable actions creates ambiguity in its strategic intent and undermines the credibility of its arms control commitments.
- Secondly, implementation presents a significant challenge. Arms control agreements rely on verification mechanisms to ensure compliance. While these protocols are established for nuclear weapons, they remain ambiguous for cyberspace and artificial intelligence. Moreover, the institutional frameworks necessary to enforce rules and penalise violations are currently absent for many proposed regulations.
- Third, there is a question about fairness. China's White Paper criticises unfair rules made by Western countries. But would China's proposed rules actually be fairer, or would they just be different rules that favour China instead of Western countries? Such frameworks might simply replace arrangements advantaging Western powers with arrangements favouring China instead, rather than establishing genuinely equitable arrangements benefiting all states equally.

Conclusion

China's White Paper on arms control in the new era is a significant document that reveals how China thinks about global security. The document shows that China wants to be seen as a responsible, peaceful country that supports international rules. At the same time, the white paper shows that China wants to shape those international rules in ways that give China advantages.

For India and other countries, China's White Paper presents both opportunities and challenges. The opportunities include China's support for the United Nations and its stated commitment to peaceful development. The challenges include uncertainty

about whether China will actually follow these commitments and concerns that new international rules might favour China over other countries.

The paper shows that the world's future security will depend not only on old weapons like nuclear bombs but also on new technologies like artificial intelligence and cyberspace. How countries manage these new challenges will determine whether the world becomes more peaceful or more dangerous in the coming years.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

ENDNOTES

¹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. "China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era." White paper. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 27, 2025. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjzc/202511/t20251127_11761656.html.

² "The PRC's Expanding Arms Control Agenda," Jamestown Foundation, December 11, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/the-prcs-expanding-arms-control-agenda/>

³ Zhenqiang Pan, "A Study of China's No-First-Use Policy on Nuclear Weapons," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (2018): 115–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1458415>.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Guo Xiaobing, "China's New Arms Control White Paper Rebutts Nuclear Smears," *China Military Online*, December 3, 2025, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/2025xb/O_251451/16425088.html.

⁶ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. "China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era." White paper. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 27, 2025. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjzc/202511/t20251127_11761656.html.

⁷ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era," *China Daily*, updated November 28, 2025, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202511/28/WS6928dd47a310d6866eb2bcd8_3.html.

⁸ Femy Francis, "Ten Takeaways on White Paper 'China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era,'" *China Reader* (blog), *Global Politics*, December 2, 2025, https://globalpolitics.in/view_cir_articles.php?url=China%20Reader&recordNo=1868.

⁹ Jonas Olsson, "China's Nuclear Arsenal Surges 20% in One Year, Reaching Over 600 Warheads: SIPRI," *Breaking Defense*, June 15, 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/06/chinas-nuclear-arsenal-surges-20-in-one-year-reaching-over-600-warheads-sipri/>.

¹⁰ Femy Francis, "Ten Takeaways on White Paper 'China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era,'" *China Reader* (blog), *Global Politics*, December 2, 2025, https://globalpolitics.in/view_cir_articles.php?url=China%20Reader&recordNo=1868.

¹¹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. "China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era." White paper. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 27, 2025. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjzc/202511/t20251127_11761656.html.

¹² Femy Francis, "Ten Takeaways on White Paper 'China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era,'" *China Reader* (blog), *Global Politics*, December 2, 2025, https://globalpolitics.in/view_cir_articles.php?url=China%20Reader&recordNo=1868.

¹³ Imran Khalid, "China's Arms Control White Paper Reconfigures Global Security Governance," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, December 15, 2025, <https://fpif.org/chinas-arms-control-white-paper-reconfigures-global-security-governance/>.

¹⁴ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. "China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era." White paper. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 27, 2025. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjzc/202511/t20251127_11761656.html.

¹⁵ Anushka Saxena, "Disarmament with Chinese Characteristics," *Takshashila Institution* (blog), December 1, 2025, <https://takshashila.org.in/content/blogs/2025-12-01-China-New-White-Paper.html>.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ "China Issues White Paper on Arms Control," *The Diplomatic Insight*, November 28, 2025, <https://thediomaticinsight.com/china-issues-white-paper-on-arms-control/>.

¹⁸ David Lague, "Special Report: China's Growing Nuclear Arsenal," *Reuters*, August 20, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/special-report-chinas-growing-nuclear-arsenal-2025-08-20/>.

¹⁹ The Hindu Bureau, "India Increased Its Nuclear Warhead Count to 180 in 2024: SIPRI Report," *The Hindu*, June 17, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-maintains->

[nuclear-edge-over-pakistan-with-more-warheads-next-gen-canisterised-mirv-capable-missiles-sipri-report/article69703913.ece](https://www.sipri.org/reports/2016/06/indias-nuclear-edge-over-pakistan-with-more-warheads-next-gen-canisterised-mirv-capable-missiles-sipri-report/article69703913.ece).

²⁰ Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India's Nuclear Doctrine: Debate or Confusion?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/06/indias-nuclear-doctrine-debate?lang=en>.

²¹ Ibid

²² *The Hindu*. "India Rules out Joining NPT as Non-nuclear Weapon State." October 13, 2017. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-rules-out-joining-npt-as-non-nuclear-weapon-state/article19855611.ece>.

²³ Gurmeet Kanwal, "The New World Order: An Appraisal—II," *Strategic Analysis* 23, no. 4 (July 1999): 549–570, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_99kag04.html.

²⁴ Kartik Bommakanti, "The Ominous Expansion of China's Nuclear Capabilities: Implications for India," *Observer Research Foundation*, July 18, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-ominous-expansion-of-china-s-nuclear-capabilities-implications-for-india>.