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***Session V: Global Zero: Asian Responses***

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# Global Zero: A Chinese View

## 1. The Global Zero

Global Zero is a major international effort to rid nuclear weapons from the earth planet. The Washington, DC-based World Security Institute launched this campaign in December 2008 and it has become one of American President Barack Obama's main political objectives. On April 5, 2009 he spoke in Prague to propose a world free of nuclear weapons. On April 8, 2010 he and Russian President Medvedev signed in Prague the new START Treaty, each committing to cutting their strategic warheads to 1,550. On May 3, 2010, the Pentagon released its new version of Nuclear Posture Review, repeating the US "long-term goal of a world free of nuclear weapons".

President Obama's vision of a nuclear weapons free world has injected fresh thoughts into the US national security. For over half a century, America has depended upon nuclear deterrence for its national security, and subsequently invested significantly amount of resources in this regard. During the Cold War time, the US and former Soviet Union entered nuclear arms race for decades, pursuing strategic dominance against each other. It is questionable if their "mutual assured deterrence" might have truly offered them security; however, their reliance on nuclear weaponry has emphasized the role of such weapons in national security, counterproductive to nuclear non-proliferation, even during the Cold War.

China used to perceive nuclear weapons as "paper tiger". But given nuclear threats it faced during the Korean War and a number of other episodes, Beijing altered its views and went nuclear in 1950s. In 1955, China launched its crash program of nuclear weapons development and succeeded in its first atomic weapon test in 1964. It further succeeded in conducting its first thermal nuclear weapon test in 1967. Since then, it has been largely believed that China has employed a minimum nuclear deterrence with a moderate nuclear arsenal, though Beijing has tightly guarded the details of its nuclear wherewithal.

## 2. A vision shared

In fact, China much earlier proposed its own version of "global zero". On October 16, 1961, on conducting its very first nuclear testing, Beijing put forward its official communiqué, stating that "Chinese government urges a complete prohibition and thorough destruction of all nuclear weapons." Chinese authority also invited leadership of all nuclear weapons states to convene a summit in Beijing to address complete nuclear weapons disarmament worldwide. On this

occasion, China also proposed its no-use and no-first-use doctrines – under no time and circumstances would it be the first to use nuclear weapons; and under no time and circumstance would it use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear weapons states – at a later stage, China extended this assurance to nuclear weapons free zones as well.

Forty-five years after China first envisioned a world free of nuclear weapons in 1964, American government resonated with Chinese idea of complete nuclear disarmament. Though there exists significant disparity between their nuclear weapons capabilities, Washington and Beijing have started to share a common progressive objective. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that China has persistently adhered to its long-held nuclear positions, though it doesn't highlight them prominently. It needs to be pointed out that China might feel a need to modernize its nuclear arsenal to some extent, but in no way this is going to alter the current nuclear balance.

At official level, neither China nor the US has officially stressed that the two countries are sharing their vision and objective of complete nuclear disarmament now. The US government has not given credit of Global Zero to China's invention of such in 1960s, and Chinese side also seems to distance itself from the US Global Zero, showing no interests presently in claiming its "patent" and pushing for the agenda of a Global Zero.

### 3. Vast nuclear disparity

Though China and the US are theoretically sharing common goal of complete nuclear disarmament, their nuclear weapons capacities remain vastly different. Quantitatively, the size of their nuclear arsenals differs vastly. Though China's exact nuclear arsenal remains opaque, it has been estimated by various sources at tens' level in terms of strategic system, and at low end of hundreds' level in terms of theater system. Comparatively, the US nuclear arsenal might be more than ten times bigger than China presently, and even by the completion of the new START, the US nuclear arsenal might be still some five times bigger than China, not to account for those reserved systems in US nuclear stockpile.

Qualitatively, the US may lead a significant edge in nuclear weapons technology. Platform-wise, the US clearly leads in nuclear triad basing, especially in underwater clandestineness and space penetration stealthy. It might still enjoy warhead miniaturization and multiple independent re-entry flexibility. Washington's persistent effort of anti-missile interception, from either the earth or the space, tests Beijing's confidence in its solvability of China's strategic systems. The US advancement of modern precision guided striking systems also seems to challenge China's traditional nuclear doctrine.

Given its signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, China's ability of modernizing its nuclear warhead through physical tests has been frozen. Though Beijing could assumably use available data and computer modelling to improve its warhead moderately, it might be hard to conceive a design revolution reliably, which in turn affects its overall strategic force modernization. Its moratorium of fissile material production for weapons purpose also caps its ability to expand its strategic force when it perceives a need for national security.

#### 4. Obama's disarmament offensive

Therefore, despite the US notion of Global Zero of 2008 resembles China's vision of complete nuclear disarmament in 1960s, the impact on their respective national security could be quite different. For America, it is generally understood that a super-kill nuclear arsenal is no longer necessary, as there is no co-superpower as Soviet Union to deter against. In fact, the US emphasis on nuclear deterrence makes itself difficult to justify the political imperative of nuclear nonproliferation worldwide. It is after the end of the Cold War that a number of countries have gone nuclear, openly or clandestinely. India, Pakistan and the DPRK (North Korea) have each tested their nuclear weapons, and North Korea even has withdrawn from the NPT. Some other states such as Iraq, Iran and Syria have been suspected of nuclear weapons intention in the recent two decades. In 2005, the NPT Review Conference even failed to make consensus of further advancement of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. These bode ill for America security, especially in the aftermath of terrorist attack of September 11, 2001.

Though American strategic community remains undivided to adhere to nuclear deterrent, there has emerged a relative fresh view that nuclear weapons brings more harm to America than help. It is understood that the nuclear proliferation, if unchecked, could fundamentally hurt global security balance and American institution, and the best remedy to contain such spread is to delegitimize all nuclear weapons from the planet. To this end, America shall work with all other nuclear weapons states to completely disarm their nuclear arsenals, in an incremental and measured way. Obviously, the US has to work with Russia first, given the fact that their nuclear weapons still account for more than 95% of the total nuclear weapons inventory of the world presently.

The new START Treaty signed in Prague in April 2010, to be ratified by the US Senate and Russian State Duma, would entail seven years to complete the deep cut of their accountable deployed strategic warheads to 1,550. Given the US political climate in the Senate, it is likely that the Treaty would be ratified despite the test of an upcoming mid-term election. This means that upon completion of their treaty obligation by around 2020, the US and Russia would be ready in rallying the world for the next round of Global Zero – pressing the medium

nuclear weapons powers as UK, France and China to clarify their position to join a multilateral nuclear disarmament process. China may find not ready yet, but it could be expected to explain the reason: how small its nuclear arsenal would justify its non-action yet.

## 5. China's strategic ponderation

China and the US share fundamental view of Global Zero but differ in their responsibility in substantiating it. As described above, the two countries have huge disparity in their nuclear capabilities so the Global Zero has to be an incremental process starting from America and Russia. Politically, they still deeply suspect each other, with theoretical chance to wage a war on the issue of China's "core interest", i.e., on the question of Taiwan. While the US enjoys its formidable superiority of conventional war fighting capability, Beijing doesn't have credible alternative deterrence even though it has officially reckoned its nuclear force for a retaliatory role solely.

Accordingly, to address China's national security without nuclear weapons, Beijing has to build its capacity of a credible non-nuclear deterrent, likely to include the components of space security, cyber-space security and advanced conventional systems. It has been speculated that the country is working on these presently. While US and the world at large won't necessarily welcome such development, as this complicates American dominance and helps shift balance in Beijing's favor, it prepares China for a much lesser nuclear weapons world.

It is obvious that the US would not give up nuclear deterrence anytime soon without assuring the world would entirely rid nuclear weapons, so as to sustain Pax America while better countering nuclear proliferation and terrorism. China welcomes a world free of nuclear weapons but would only envision its participation at a time of credible alternative deterrence, though it would not quest for Pax Sinica. As China feels its legitimate core interest in Taiwan is undercut by America, it has to be prepared for American challenges with appropriate means. Their mutual hedging each justifies its unwillingness to yield nuclear weaponry and to accept the other's conventional superiority.

## 6. The space nexus

Lately their balance of power has entered the outer space. For long time, China has opposed to the US space weaponization efforts. From President Reagan's Star War to President George W.H. Bush's GPALS (Global Protection against Limited Strikes) to President Clinton's phased deployment of National Missile Defense, China has persistently opposed to them. From early 1990s, China and other

countries have raised the agenda of “prevention of arms race in outer space” (PAROS) and subsequently proposed an ad hoc negotiation on PAROS in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

The trajectory of history indicates that when a strategic balance is broken, the stakeholder(s) would make various efforts to re-strike a balance. China developed nuclear weapons under the US nuclear coercion in 1950s. Fifty years later, when China perceived serious threat to the effectiveness of its nuclear force due to the US strategic defense, and failing to halt such move on American part, Beijing seems to undertake a similar path, though presently at a qualitatively and quantitatively much lower level.

In 2007, China’s ballistic missile hit its abandoned weather satellite 800km above the earth to establish its ability of an anti-satellite warfare capacity. In 2009, China’s Command-in-Chief General Xu Qiliang made it clear that the country will inevitably embark on an integration of airspace and aerospace. Though no one could predict the exact next move of China in this regard, it is safe to ascertain China’s interest in assuring the effectiveness of its strategic offence/defense capability, which shall have a bearing on China’s attitude on Global Zero.

## 7. The DPRK complex

Though China and the US have a strategic competitive relationship, as major powers of the world they have common interest in curbing nuclear proliferation. The two countries collaborated in 1995 and 2010 obviously to assure the world their responsibility in nuclear assurance and disarmament. This is out of their calculation of their respective national interest and provision of global commons.

Though China and the US may understand differently on the genesis of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, Washington and Beijing increasingly dislike Pyongyang’s approach to dealing with American security pressures on North Korea. Since spring 2003, China has ventured a process of multilateral negotiation of Pyongyang’s denuclearization. China has used a different argument, non-proliferation and regional stability, to provide logic to its organization of a six-party talk. Its theorizing differentiates its own nuclear weapons development under a similar situation of American threat with that of North Korea. Beijing’s change of security discourse indicates the shift of its security concern and international responsibility, narrowing its political distance with the US and American allies.

However, China’s shift of interest and responsibility doesn’t address North Korea’s security hyperrealism. Except for accepting the policy goal of denuclearization should America relinquish its “hostility”, Pyongyang has actually pushed forward its nuclear weapons program, announcing to have conducted two nuclear tests since October 2007. The DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Pak Kil Yon made clear in the 65<sup>th</sup> Session of USGA in September 2010 that his country would

not abandon nuclear deterrent if the US would not change its hostility. Despite China-US cooperation in reverting the DPRK's nuclear program, their effort so far has not succeeded. Global Zero has met serious challenge in Northeast Asia.

## 8. Different policy priorities

Though China and the US share in principle the value of complete nuclear disarmament or Global Zero, this ranks differently in their respective national security agenda. For America, nuclear non-proliferation ranks highly, in particular in the aftermath of "911" terrorist attack. The three National Security Strategy Reports of the White House published since 2002 have each highlighted the imperative to defeat international terrorism especially as it may couple with the spread of technology of weapons of mass destruction.

But in reality, the US has given different recipes to different cases of nuclear proliferation – it pre-empted Iraq without substantiating Saddam's WMD build-up; it softened stance toward the DPRK each time the latter made a nuclear test; it also relaxed domestic law to allow civilian nuclear cooperation with India and prompted exemption of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, while denying China's interests in exporting to Pakistan light water reactor(s) under IAEA safeguards.

In case where the US attaches significant importance, Iran's nuclear issue, China may also have its own priority. China shares the interests with the US and the rest of the world in assuring that Iran shall be accountable in using nuclear energy responsibly. Beijing has supported several UNSC resolutions to sanction Iran for its non-compliance of treaty obligation and non-observance of Security Council demand to suspend uranium enrichment. However, China differs with the US in insisting not to expand sanctions to some other areas, possibly to protect its energy and business interests in Teheran.

## 9. The mutual hedging

China and the US have complex relations. Even in the area of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, their relations are complicated – sharing fundamental value while differing in particular interests, either due to the reasons of the US or China. They share value as they perceive themselves as responsible power for regional and global order. While their own national security has also been satisfied by their nuclear weapons, they are increasingly challenged by the spreading of nuclear weapons, mostly along China's periphery.

China-US divide largely origins in their distrust. China is the only major power that has its territorial integration unfulfilled and the main outside factor concerning its integration with Taiwan is the American intervention. Beijing needs to keep its

nuclear weapons as a strategic hedge though fundamentally it has to address its “harmonious relationship” with Taiwan. Without this issue addressed to a satisfactory level, it looks unlikely that Beijing would take an idealistic approach to dismantle its nuclear arms along with America and others, especially prematurely when the US and Russia would each possess few times more nuclear weapons than China, even if they fulfill the new START obligation.

Their mutual hedging relationship is expanding to outer space, cyber space and deep sea. In the next ten years, the US would be further apprehensive over China’s expansion of interests and capacity. America may still rise but its lead over China could be much narrowed. The US would have to tap the resources of its allies in the region to check and balance China’s ego. With China’s further rise, Beijing could be far less tolerant in American dominance which contains its “core” interests. In this context, the chance that China would embrace the Global Zero is slim. Further, in the regional context, without China’s action, the chance that India and Pakistan would join Global Zero is zero, though China feels irrelevant that India’s case shall be linked to its.

## 10. China-US cooperation

At strategic level, the lack of trust between China and the US and the disparity between their nuclear arsenals in the coming decade won’t make them cooperate in Global Zero. However, their shared interests in nonproliferation, though differing in priority from time to time, warrant their collaboration in securing stability in much of Asia – Northeast Asia, South Asia and Middle East.

In Northeast Asia, assuring the DPRK to at least freeze its nuclear weapons program will be the next realistic goal before any nuclear dismantlement action could be in place. Even this is difficult to attain, pending upon the US-DPRK political dynamism. It is not inconceivable that a decade late America would have to accept the hard reality that North Korea is a *de facto* nuclear weapons state and Washington has to develop normal relations with Pyongyang, much as it has done with India and Pakistan.

In South Asia, maintaining a stable and peaceful situation on the subcontinent and between states would be of paramount important to all, regardless if India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons or not. One welcomes the improvement of US-India relations for their own benefit and for regional stability, but queries the wisdom to develop this tie for the factor of China. While China and India shall persistently improve their trust so any one of them would not need to with a third party for its interest, China and the US also need to have respective confidence in working with the region, being aware that the two major actors in South Asia are nuclear weaponized.

In Middle East, it is important that both China and the US shall balance its short-term and long-term national interests in dealing with non-proliferation, energy security and other geostrategic issues. It would help build their trust if they could improve policy consultation and coordination vis-à-vis some sensible regional proliferation concerns. This is an area to turn their competition and suspicion to trust and cooperation.

Though in the next decade Beijing and Washington will rebalance their power and interest and their relationship could not be rather smooth, after two decades this process will largely end with a newer balance, when China could have built a conventional deterrence and attained good headway in space balance as well. That might be the time when nuclear weapons could start to be phased out in China's national security, not only due to proliferation concern, but because international relations have been improved to its confidence. That would also be roughly the time when the US and Russia have finished their next round of deeper cut after the present new START process.