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Congressional Testimony

**An Emerging China-Russia Axis?
Implications for the United States in an Era
of Strategic Competition.**

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Introduction

Thank you to the Commissioners for the opportunity to testify. In my testimony, I will discuss how China and Russia view arms control and nonproliferation agreements. As my expertise lies primarily in U.S.-Russia arms control and nuclear policy, this is the perspective from which I hope to offer insights for the Commission's further work.

My testimony includes analysis on Russian and Chinese views on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, how termination of the agreement may affect Sino-Russian relations, resulting drivers for China to potentially shift its nuclear thinking, and how the United States and allies can respond to changing regional stability dynamics in the Asia-Pacific. I will conclude with some recommendations for the Commission's further consideration.

My key analytical observations follow:

(1) For a number of reasons, stemming mostly from the large disparity in the U.S. and Chinese nuclear weapons inventories, China has historically avoided engaging the United States in arms control agreements. China has increased participation in the broader global nonproliferation regime over the past few decades, but its reticence toward traditional arms control persists in the face of INF termination and is unlikely to change in the near future.^{1,2} Overall, the factors that have historically prevented Beijing from arms control with the United States will be present for the future.

(2) In the aftermath of INF termination, the U.S. and Russia will have to consider the strategic and arms race stability implications of deploying formerly banned missiles in East Asia, including China's potential responses to these deployments. U.S. and Russian concerns regarding Chinese nuclear modernization and missile programs are long-standing. It is possible that China could adopt a less restrained nuclear doctrine, as U.S. and Russian missile deployments could undermine Beijing's confidence in its small nuclear deterrent force. Such a shift would affect alliance security and regional stability.

(3) China and Russia have engaged in sporadic strategic cooperation since the dawn of the nuclear age. U.S. actions are one driver for this cooperation, but not the sole driver. It is difficult to predict the extent to which the Sino-Russian relationship will be more or less cooperative after the INF Treaty's demise.

Part I. Differences in Beijing and Moscow's Views on Arms Control Regimes

Introduction:

Whereas China only began to engage in global nonproliferation and arms control regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet Union was a founder alongside the United States of the many agreements that later became pillars of the international nonproliferation system. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union engaged in bilateral nuclear negotiations with the United States beginning in the 1960s. These efforts resulted in a series of agreements that limited and then reduced the strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces of both states. Today, however, both Russia

and China are increasingly skeptical of traditional arms control. Although they are wary such processes for varying reasons, their cynicism will shape efforts to negotiate future reductions.

China:

Since first demonstrating a nuclear weapons capability in 1964, Beijing has maintained a relatively small nuclear stockpile, publicly estimated to contain below 300 warheads. The limited nature of China's nuclear force compared to the still-large U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, among other factors,³ undergirds Beijing's refusal to participate in traditional nuclear arms control. The rationale behind this aversion, and its potential to change, are explored further in Part III.

China's hesitancy to engage in nuclear arms control has not prevented it from participating in global arms control and nonproliferation agreements, though Beijing's record of accomplishment is mixed. After joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and, later, the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), Beijing has largely upheld nonproliferation norms and practices, though with some notable exceptions. At the same time, however, Chinese entities have engaged in serial proliferation of missile technology, resulting in numerous U.S. sanctions.

Beyond these global agreements, Beijing also participates in regional transparency and confidence-building measures (TCBMs) designed to minimize tensions and limit military forces along contested borders, and peacefully address territorial and maritime disputes with neighbors. These measures include the China-Russia Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities, the Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces with the Central Asian former Soviet Union states, the China-India Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility Along the Line of Control, and the China-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. While non-binding understandings have limits, and China's interest in keeping U.S. views out of these conversations may lead one to question its motives,⁴ these are examples of Beijing's interest in preserving regional stability.

Historically, China's concerns with the U.S. military's capabilities, policies, and unwillingness to address China's security concerns in negotiations may make further TCBMs unlikely.⁵ Chinese officials find particularly vexing:

- U.S. military actions and placement of forces, such as the Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea, in China's periphery;
- advancements in U.S. conventional precision strike capabilities and their potential use against Chinese strategic assets;
- U.S. refusal to engage on Chinese-proposed arms control proposals;⁶ and,
- a U.S. Missile Defense Review (MDR) that continues to push for greater technological advancement in missile defenses.

To Beijing, these are all examples confirming China's suspicions regarding U.S. intentions. These actions have parallels in a Russia context as well, given the aforementioned concerns in Moscow regarding NATO expansion and U.S. missile defenses. Not surprisingly, Chinese and Russian officials recently noted their opposition to U.S. unilateralism as a reason for forming a strategic partnership.⁷

Russia:

Moscow's wariness of traditional arms limitations is growing. In the past decade, Moscow has methodically ceased implementation of or violated arms control agreements that Russian leaders have found disadvantageous. The Kremlin's violation of the INF Treaty, refusal to negotiate a follow-on agreement to the New START Treaty in 2013, and willingness to flout other international obligations paint Moscow as currently cynical about self-restraint, diplomatic and military cooperation, and mutual risk reduction.

This follows stagnation of the bilateral arms control process after the significant accomplishments of the 1987 INF Treaty and the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction (START) treaties. U.S.-Russia arms control was undermined by several factors:

- the failure of the START II entry into force;
- Advancements in U.S. conventional precision strike capabilities their potential use against Russian strategic assets, and the potential that such capabilities would not be constrained through an arms control agreement;
- U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty; and,
- a shift in the U.S. focus in the 1990s and 2000s to combating global terrorism and related conflicts (this is a fact, without judging whether the overall results are positive or negative for U.S. strategic interests).

Perhaps most significantly, the U.S. ABM withdrawal has been a sticking point for Russia. This action showed a United States backing away from the concept of strategic offensive and defensive weapons being interrelated, which long underpinned both countries' assessment of the bilateral strategic balance. Russia continues to criticize U.S. ABM withdrawal as an example of arms control perfidy, and to this day, it is put forward as a key element of Russia's negotiating position for a future arms control agreement. Russia is focusing research and development efforts on missile defense-evading capabilities.

Both China and Russia distrust U.S. intentions, perceiving the U.S. as determined to preserve global and regional dominance, and to deny them what they view as their natural and rightful primacy in their home regions. They perceive a U.S. refusal to address or negotiate over their political and security concerns, or weapons systems (including ballistic missile defenses) that alarm them. However, the differing views on traditional arms control cooperation with the United States do not appear to materially affect the Sino-Russian relationship.

Part II. The INF Treaty and the Impact of Treaty Termination on Sino-Russian Relations

It is unclear whether the end of the INF treaty will lead to greater security cooperation between China and Russia, or greater suspicion. China's public reaction to the INF Treaty announcements do not preview what Beijing's military response may be. Chinese officials have openly asked the two sides to work out their differences and preserve the INF Treaty. Additionally, Chinese officials have made clear that China would not join a multilateral INF Treaty.⁸ How China reacts over time to an increase in Russian intermediate-range missile deployments will provide a signal

whether China views Russia's INF responses as suspicious and/or destabilizing, and whether military cooperation will ramp up or decrease.

Russia feelings toward the INF Treaty shifted substantially due to alleged concerns regarding China's military power. In particular, Russian officials have argued since the mid-2000s that China's (and other nearby countries') growing medium range missile force is concerning.⁹ Then-Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov cited China as a worrisome possessor,¹⁰ calling Russia's adherence to INF a "mistake" and claiming that these missiles would be "quite useful" to have.¹¹

Unable to build a formidable arsenal of intermediate-range ground-launched missiles, Russia instead pursued a modernization of its short-range rocket forces, introducing the advanced *Iskander* missile system in the mid-2000s. It was also in this period that Russia might have begun development of the INF-violating SSC-8 cruise missile.¹² The Kremlin prioritized development of these missiles, regardless of existing Russian INF obligations, to meet the concerns expressed by Putin and Ivanov. Given the prior *Iskander* deployments to the Far East, there is potential for Russian intermediate-range missile deployments in the region as well. These actions fit with the security concerns embedded in Russia's criticism of the INF Treaty.

Future military-technical cooperation between Russia and China would not be unprecedented. Prior to the 1960 Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese ballistic missile program benefitted from Soviet assistance.¹³ The two countries also cooperated on nuclear technology, with nuclear technology sharing agreements concluded by General Secretary Khrushchev and Chairman Mao during the 1950s. In the past, China has purchased and reverse engineered Russian air defense systems, and most recently purchased the advanced S-400. Russia was the primary exporter of arms to China following Tiananmen Square-related arms embargos from Western nations.

Nevertheless, deep-seated distrust in the Sino-Russian relationship makes long-term and extensive security cooperation of this kind difficult to imagine, even after the INF Treaty is gone. The two countries appear to be partners of convenience in security cooperation, both foils to the United States on numerous issues, as expressed in multilateral fora.¹⁴ Importantly, China and Russia each field indigenously developed advanced missiles; the technology required for their respective strategic and non-strategic missile systems is no longer exceptionally novel, and each country can stand as an independent military power. There is likely less value to technical cooperation today than there was at the beginning of the Cold War. Moreover, the concerns expressed by Russian officials in the mid-2000s called out China's large, unrestrained missile force; this security problem still exists today. Finally, Moscow's concerns with China's economic influence in Central Asia, its long-term economic and manpower advantages, and its military strength in Russia's backyard, will likely prevent any "strategic cooperation" from moving toward a true military alliance.

Part III. Factors Which May Motivate a Change in China's Nuclear Posture, and the Effects on Regional Stability

China's strategic deterrent is composed of 75-100 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), with efforts underway to add more survivable, delivery systems, such as modern, mobile ICBMs and ballistic missile submarines (SSBN).¹⁵ Largely, China is seeking to buttress a retaliatory strike

capability, which fits with its restrained nuclear doctrine. Yet these advancements, combined with some ambiguity in China's nuclear doctrine (including the scenarios under which Beijing's NFU policy may no longer apply) have caused concern among U.S. defense officials.¹⁶

The souring U.S.-Russia nuclear relationship and probable halt to further nuclear reductions, in addition to potential U.S. and Russian missile deployments following the end of the INF Treaty, may prompt Beijing to adopt a less restrained doctrine than its current minimum deterrent posture and "no first use" (NFU) policy. Such a shift could negatively affect an already precarious regional stability dynamic and Sino-Russian relation. An action-reaction cycle of missile deployments and more assertive nuclear policies would undermine regional stability, and allied security. However, it is unclear whether U.S. and Russian intermediate-range missile deployments in Asia would be a motivator for Beijing to abandon decades of a conservative nuclear policy.

At this point, China maintains a small strategic deterrent, and is not motivated to attempt to meet U.S. or Russian strategic forces numerically. This position is unlikely to change. As the U.S.-China relationship has become more competitive, China has not taken steps to drastically increase the size of its nuclear arsenal to this point. As mentioned above, China has fielded a relatively small nuclear force despite possessing a nuclear weapons capability for more than fifty years. This posture fits with China's long-held view that the size of its nuclear force is unimportant as long as it is capable of reprisal against an adversary's nuclear attack (which reinforces its current NFU policy).¹⁷ Ostensibly, China is more interested in the modernization and expansion of its conventional forces – military capabilities useful for regional security goals - than a nuclear "sprint to parity."

Part IV. Prospects for Arms Control and Addressing Evolving Regional Stability Concerns

China does not possess the decades of cooperative experience that resulted in U.S.-Soviet arms control muscle memory. The U.S.-Russia arms control process began nearly six decades ago with limited TCBMs following the Cuban Missile Crisis. U.S.-Soviet negotiations for eventual arms limitations took years, with the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks resulting in tangible agreements in the ABM Treaty and Interim Agreement on offensive arms limits after three years of intense bilateral negotiations. U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russian agreements concluded since then have largely been based on the original work of the SALT negotiators. The extremely detailed provisions of the START and INF treaties - definitions for weapons capabilities, categories of weapons to be limited, the kinds of information to be shared for verifying capabilities and intentions, and procedures for meetings, data sharing, and inspection - all sprang from long SALT negotiations nearly two decades before. In summary, it is naïve to think that a U.S.-China arms control relationship can be developed overnight.

As has been the case for decades, China will continue to support US-Russia arms control processes, despite not being party to them. The discrepancy in nuclear stockpiles (Table 1) is regularly advanced by Beijing as a reason to avoid arms control with the United States and Russia. Intuitively, China sees value in a continuing U.S.-Russia arms control process, regularly voicing support for continued New START implementation, and for both sides to find a cooperative way

to save the INF Treaty. New START constrains U.S. nuclear forces capable of striking the Chinese mainland, benefitting Chinese posturing and planning.

Beijing's open lack of interest in joining INF,¹⁸ and the clear U.S. and Russian interest in deploying the previously banned missiles, mean that the intermediate-range missile space will likely remain unconstrained by arms control for the near future. Following the recent U.S. suspension, the United States is legally permitted to field ground-based, intermediate range systems. U.S. officials and analysts have noted the value of these missiles against China. It is logical for Beijing to anticipate potential U.S. missile deployments in the Asia-Pacific. As described above, Russia has already deployed short-range missile systems in the Far East, and after suspending the Treaty shortly after the U.S. announcement, can legally field intermediate-range missiles close to China's borders as well. Adding to this bleak outlook, the worsening of tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship, and unlikely nuclear reductions progress, may make a serious strategic arms control effort that includes China even less likely.¹⁹

The eventual termination of the INF Treaty has put regional allies further in the bullseye in both Asia and Europe, and may put regional stability at risk. Asian countries may have to contend with intermediate-range missile deployments by the United States, Russia, and additional deployments by China. U.S. allies in the region have not faced a Russian nuclear and conventional ground-based, intermediate-range missile threat for the past thirty years. Whether China responds symmetrically or chooses asymmetric responses, such as designing greater capabilities to suppress targeting and communications, missile defenses, or space and cyber responses, these moves will affect allied security and regional stability. The likelihood is present for all major players in the region – the United States and its allies, China, and Russia - to increase military capabilities after the INF Treaty is gone.

With the potential military deployments in the Asia-Pacific after the INF Treaty, and a lack of current U.S.-China dialogue on arms control, efforts to create regional cooperative security mechanisms may help reduce uncertainty as the new strategic picture in the Asia-Pacific becomes clear. Regional allies can pressure China to engage in a U.S.-China diplomatic process focused on developing regional TCBMs in which both competitors partake. This should be a long-term objective, but requires a dialogue that both sides have thus far have been unable or unwilling to begin.

Given these dynamics, starting a U.S.-China arms control process can help address China's expanding military power and a worsening U.S. military edge to avoid inadvertent war or costly, unnecessary military buildups. In the past several years, China has refused to open the door to mutual restraint with the United States. It is unclear today what role arms control plays in a U.S. strategy toward China, and whether there are particular Chinese capabilities and policies that the United States believes are important to constrain or have greater transparency into. To develop this agenda successfully, the United States needs to:

- Overcome China's historical unwillingness to engage in strategic arms control or demonstrate transparency into its strategic weapons (this requires increasing Beijing's

- confidence that this transparency is not for exploitation by the U.S. military, but to promote mutual predictability);
- Express openness regarding U.S. intentions and reactions to Chinese actions; and,
 - Consider U.S. policies, capabilities, and military actions that directly motivate Chinese officials' interest in a less restrained nuclear doctrine and posture.

I will close with some specific policy recommendations for the Commission, which may provide a basis for Congress to act and encourage executive action.

Key Recommendations:

There continues to be a low likelihood of Chinese interest in arms control with the United States. However, the potential exists for U.S. and Russian actions after the demise of the INF Treaty to motivate a reaction from Beijing that creates unfavorable dynamics for the United States and allies in the Asia-Pacific. The United States should explore potential cooperative security mechanisms with China to promote regional stability. A few examples are below:

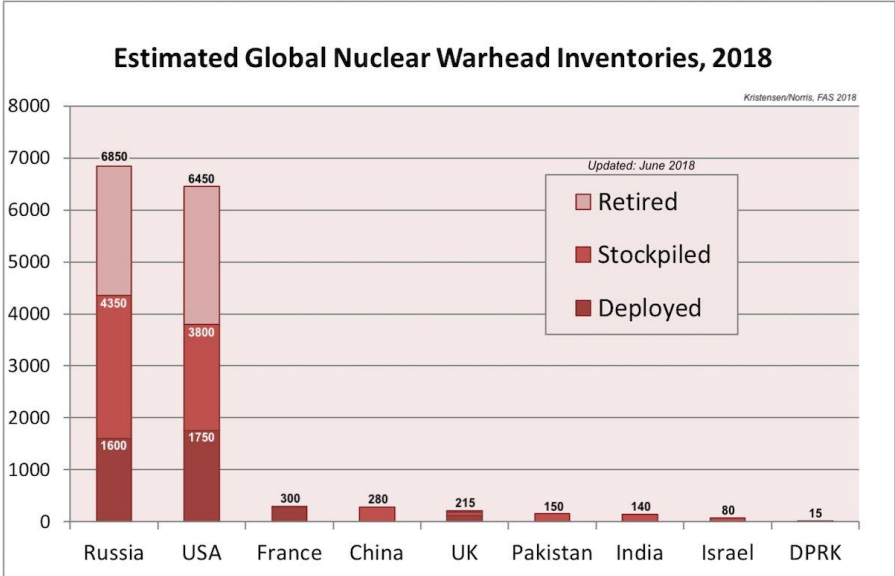
Lower the risk of any conflict: Minor crisis management, incident avoidance, open communications and similar measures can mitigate the inherent risks of U.S. and Chinese forces operating in close proximity, reduce the chance of conflict, and the chance that a conflict escalates to a nuclear exchange. The U.S.-USSR Incidents at Sea Agreement is good example, as is the 1987 Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers agreement. Congress may be able to support military-to-military communications of this kind.

Develop joint understandings on the regional drivers of heightened U.S. and allied military forces: Beijing reacted very strongly to the U.S. THAAD deployment in South Korea, a defensive system intended to address the North Korean missile threat. While some of this reaction was assuredly for domestic purposes, it displays an area of mutual interest in resolving the DPRK threat to permit an eventual reduction in U.S. and allied forces in the region. U.S.-China cooperation to address non-China regional security problems benefits both parties; supporting further study for U.S.-China cooperation on mutual regional security issues is useful.

Energize a focused, bilateral strategic dialogue: The United States and China should discuss the policies and capabilities of each country that heighten the risk of conflict or prevent effective management of escalation in a conflict. Understanding how each side views emerging areas of concern, such as nuclear competition, advanced conventional strike, space, cyber, and missile defenses, attendant signaling and how one country may respond to the other after a provocation or limited attack, are all important topics to discuss. A critical element U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russian strategic dialogues has been the need to preserve an arms control and strategic stability discussion regardless of the state of the broader political relationship. The same walls should be built around a U.S.-China strategic dialogue. Such a dialogue can also serve China's security interests, safeguard stability, and ease motivations Beijing may have to abandon its restrained nuclear policies. Expressing support for a strategic dialogue may create the necessary political space for the Executive Branch to prioritize this in its existing China policy framework.

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Table 1



Federation of American Scientists. Status of World Nuclear Forces, Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Inventories, 2018.¹⁹