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**Policy Memorandum on Promoting Trust-Building between the U.S. and  
China in the Field of Nuclear Security**

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## **Trust Is Imperative for U.S.-China Cooperation on Nuclear Security Issues**

It is generally recognized that the U.S. and China share significant common interests in cooperating on issues of nuclear nonproliferation and arms control. The robustness of nuclear deterrence determines that quality and quantity of nuclear weapons no longer dominate the calculations around nuclear policy as long as a nuclear retaliatory capability can be maintained. Nuclear primacy is hardly a viable or even a desirable goal to pursue. Instead, major nuclear powers care more about maintaining strategically stable relationships with each other that are underwritten by nuclear deterrence. There is little doubt that the U.S. and China share a common interest in maintaining so called strategic stability with each other. Such common/shared interests motivate them to cooperate to prevent nuclear arms races from happening that are unnecessary, dangerous, and financially costly.

Although common/shared interests offer an incentive for countries to cooperate, they do not necessarily lead to cooperation. There are cases in which there is an incentive for mutual cooperation from which both countries will benefit but neither country is 100 percent sure about whether the other country will choose to cooperate because an incentive to defect is also present. In the situation of prisoner's dilemma, defection is the default choice for both players, but they also share some degree of common interests and therefore both of them would be better served if they can trust each other and both choose to cooperate. In situations like this, trust is a necessary condition for cooperation to take place and common interests to be achieved. Unfortunately, although the U.S. and China shared significant common interests in the field of nuclear security, their lack of trust toward each other has too often prevented them from cooperating. Trust-building between them is imperative and should be actively pursued by both sides.

## **Building Trust between the U.S. and China – Breaking Down Traditional Understanding of Trust-Building**

Confidence and trust are two terms that are usually used in an interchangeable way and without recognizing their difference. This causes problems for understanding the dynamics of confidence-building vis-à-vis trust-building. One way to differentiate confidence from trust is to look at the role that uncertainty/risk plays in each of them. Confidence describes the situation in which Player A understands that Player B has an “encapsulated interest” in behaving in an expected manner. In this case, Player A knows (is confident to predict) Player B will behave in an expected manner because it will hurt B’s own interests if not to do so. There is little uncertainty/risk involved for Player A to take such a belief in Player B’s future behavior. In other words, A’s confidence is essentially based on a rational calculation of interests from B’s perspective. In contrast, trust in this research is defined as a belief that Player B will behave in an expected manner even though there is no guarantee from a pure realist calculation-of-interests perspective. The essential difference between confidence and trust is, for trust, Player A is not absolutely certain/confident from a realist perspective that Player B will behave in an expected manner; and Player A needs to accept a degree of uncertainty/risk if it chooses to trust Player B anyway.

The U.S. and China understand the role of risks in trust-building differently. That is one of the reasons why the two countries have divergent attitudes about what is the most effective approach to build trust. The Chinese are known for preferring the top-down approach. They emphasize the importance of making a political decision to trust each other at the top level and believe that trust and cooperation at lower levels can only be achieved after a commitment at the top level is made. The U.S., in contrast, prefers the bottom-up approach which emphasizes the importance of

mutual engagement and cooperation from the bottom – starting at the working/operational level; as trust is built at lower levels, it will lay the foundation for trust-building at higher levels. One of the fundamental differences between the two approaches is about the role of risk-taking in trust-building. Chinese top-down approach implicitly recognizes that risks will have to be taken in order to make an upfront commitment to cooperation at the top level. This approach sees risk-taking as an unavoidable element in this process and expects that concerns over the risks would vanish after both countries watch each other follow through with their commitment and do not take advantage of each other's vulnerabilities. The bottom-up approach, on the contrary, does not want to take risks in making an upfront commitment at the top level; so it prefers working from lower levels where the involved risk would be much smaller or even non-existent.

This different attitude toward risk-taking is reflected in their preferred arms control models. For the U.S., effective verification is critical to reach an arms control treaty, because a stringent verification regime will help remove any potential risk that the other country might cheat or might not fully implement the treaty for any reason. For China, however, political commitment is more important than a verification regime. China sees an arms control agreement more of a demonstration of political will than an effort to verify what the other side has promised to do. For them, signing up on an arms control treaty of and by itself means they will implement the agreement as promised; setting up a stringent verification mechanism would more likely introduce new problems than solve them. Such divergent arms control models have helped break down many hopeful arms control negotiations between the two countries. Whenever it is difficult to set up an effective verification mechanism, the negotiations usually ran into a deadlock.

One way to get out of this deadlock is to emphasize the fact that trust-building necessarily involves risk-taking. There is no risk-free way to build trust. Negotiators of future arms control

agreements may want to consider embedding some element of risk deliberately in the verification regime for the purpose of building trust. Take the U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control agreements for an example. In New START Treaty, the two sides are allowed to conduct 18 short-notice, on-site inspections per year. From the perspective of trust-building, it would be better if the inspection regime is designed in the following way: for the first few years (first three years, for example), 18 on-site inspections are conducted annually; but as time goes on, fewer annual inspections will be conducted (the time interval between two inspections will be extended). One or two parties can voluntarily reduce the number of annual inspections on the other's territory, or the two parties can jointly agree to reduce annual inspections as a demonstration of trust. Reducing the number of annual inspections requires and shows a willingness to take greater risks and will encourage more risk-taking in the future and contribute to trust-building as a result.

### **Problem of Reciprocity and the Role of Epistemic Communities**

Trust-building is a process of repeated interactions and cannot be achieved through a one-time event. For either the “leap of trust” approach or a gradualist approach,<sup>1</sup> trust-building requires that one player must reciprocate in a positive manner after the other player takes an initiative. For the U.S.-China nuclear interaction, it is not rare that one country took an initiative from time to time. The problem is the other country often failed to reciprocate. Very often, the failure to reciprocate is a result of domestic constraint, institutionalized traditions, and opposite ideologies. In the case of China's bilateral No-First-Use agreement initiative, the U.S. rejected the initiative partly because U.S. decision-makers and analysts have a somewhat ideological bias and

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<sup>1</sup> Wheeler, Nicholas J. 2009. Nuclear Abolition: Trust-Building's Greatest Challenge? : International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament.

suspicion toward No-First-Use for historical reasons that have little to do with China.<sup>2</sup> China did not fully understand the existence of such historical and ideological bias in the U.S. and did not fully appreciate the various domestic constraints that the U.S. president faced when responding to China's initiative. As a result, China tends to attribute the not-very-positive U.S. response to wrong factors and raise doubt about U.S. real intentions. Such lack of understanding consequently becomes obstacles for future cooperation and trust-building efforts. Ideally, after such initiatives fail, academic communities in both countries would help decision-makers identify problems, better understand these complex domestic factors at play in the opponent country, and take lessons from them. If correct lessons are learned and fed back into the policy communities, that would help remove remaining misunderstandings and misperceptions between the two countries and contribute to future trust-building efforts. Dr. Lewis and Dr. Kulacki's recent publication on U.S. perception toward No-First-Use is a good example of how academic community can contribute to breaking hard and deeply-entrenched knowledge- and perception-barriers between the two countries. This is a very important role that the epistemic communities on both sides can play to help with bilateral trust-building.

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<sup>2</sup> Kulacki, Gregory, and Jeffrey Lewis. 2012. 不首先使用核武器：中美核对话的困境与出路 (NFU in Sino-US Nuclear Dialogue: Dilemma and Way Out). *外交评论 (Foreign Affairs Review)* 29 (5).