

# China, U.S. to Meet for Rare Nuclear Arms-Control Talks

*Washington meeting comes as concerns grow over an arms race with Beijing and Moscow*

**By Michael R. Gordon**  
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The Biden administration is preparing to hold a rare discussion with China on nuclear-arms control as the U.S. seeks to head off a [destabilizing three-way arms race](#) with Beijing and Moscow.

The meeting scheduled for Monday is the first such talks with Beijing since the Obama administration and will focus on ways to reduce the risk of miscalculation, U.S. officials said.

The discussion doesn't signal the start of formal negotiations to set limits on each side's nuclear forces, as Washington has long done with Moscow. Instead, Monday's session will provide American officials with an opportunity to probe their Chinese counterparts about Beijing's nuclear doctrine and the [ambitious buildup of its nuclear arsenal](#), which for decades has been much smaller than the U.S.'s and Russia's.

"The Chinese leadership is still preparing for long-term competition with the United States," said Tong Zhao of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "The hope is if this exchange can be maintained and can happen regularly in the future, that might open up opportunities for more substantive conversations."

More urgently, Washington is grappling with the challenge of how to deter twin nuclear threats from China and Russia, including the politically fraught question of whether the U.S. will need to expand its nuclear forces in the years ahead.

In a parallel effort, the Biden administration is also trying to draw Russia into separate arms-control talks, after Moscow pulled back [from the New Start treaty](#) while still observing its limits on warheads. The administration has sent Moscow a confidential paper outlining ideas on managing nuclear risks now and after that agreement, which cuts American and Russian long-range nuclear weapons, expires in February 2026.

A senior Biden administration official said the U.S. is hoping to initiate “a conversation on what a framework after New Start could look like” while also reducing nuclear dangers while tensions are high over [Russia’s invasion of Ukraine](#).

Russia has yet to respond to the Biden administration’s proposal for fresh talks, U.S. and Russian officials say.

The opening with China comes as Washington and Beijing, after a [near free fall in relations](#) over the past year, are starting to talk about an array of trouble spots in preparation for a summit between President Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping later this month.

The two powers in recent months have agreed to open or resume channels to discuss maritime issues, commercial and trade matters and restrictions on exports of technology, among other disagreements.

But the rapprochement is delicate. Beijing has stiff-armed Biden administration requests to restore [regular contacts between military leaders](#). China has yet to confirm Xi’s participation in a summit, though the two sides [reached “an agreement in principle”](#) on the meeting.

Arms control and nonproliferation, which are among the subjects to be taken up in Monday’s meeting in Washington, have been among the thorniest of topics. The meeting was agreed to as part of a broader push to create a better political atmosphere for the anticipated summit meeting, said Carnegie’s Zhao. He said that his expectations for the arms-control discussions were modest.

, for its part, has said little about what it expects from the arms-control talks. On Monday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that differences over Taiwan represent the biggest obstacle to improved U.S.-Chinese relations and that Beijing wants to “stabilize relations.” That, he said, will include “China-U.S. consultations on arms control and nonproliferation.”

China signed the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty during the Clinton administration. But China rejected proposals during the Trump administration that it [join talks with the U.S. and Russia](#) to negotiate formal limits on nuclear forces on the grounds that its nuclear arsenal is much smaller than those of Washington and Moscow.

That argument has begun to wear thin with Western experts as China’s nuclear forces have expanded. China had more than 500 operational nuclear warheads as of May, is likely to field more than 1,000 warheads by 2030 and then continue growing its force until 2035, according to a Pentagon report issued last month on China’s military power.

As a consequence, “the United States is on the cusp of having not one, but two nuclear peer adversaries,” said a report issued last month by a congressionally appointed panel on the U.S. Strategic Posture.

The U.S. and Russia are currently limited to 1,550 deployed warheads on their long-range missiles and bombers under the New Start treaty. In total, the U.S. has about 3,700 warheads of all types in its nuclear stockpile while Russia has about 4,490, according to the Federation of American Scientists.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan proposed a way to gradually draw China into an arms-control dialogue in a June speech to the Arms Control Association, a Washington-based group.

Sullivan said that a multinational arrangement could be worked out under which China and the other four permanent members of the United Nations Security Council would agree to notify each other of missile test launches.

Such a step, he said, could be followed by arrangements to establish channels for “crisis communications” among those countries and discussions of nuclear doctrine, policy and spending. The permanent Security Council members are China, the U.S., Britain, France and Russia.

The senior Biden administration official said that the U.S. plans to follow up those ideas next week and discuss potential steps that might be carried out on a bilateral or multilateral basis. The U.S. also plans to probe China on its nuclear expansion, doctrine and concept of strategic stability.

“We need to have a discussion with them to better understand their point of view on these topics,” the official said. “And hopefully that could lead to a discussion of the practical steps that we could take to manage strategic risks, including further down the road, conversation on mutual restraint in terms of behavior or even capabilities.”

Monday’s talks will be led by Mallory Stewart, a senior State Department official, and Sun Xiaobo, the head of the arms-control department at the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

*Charles Hutzler contributed to this article.*