

A PRECARIOUS TRIANGLE: U.S.-CHINA STRATEGIC STABILITY AND JAPAN

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U.S.-China strategic nuclear relations are becoming more salient to U.S. defense planning and alliance management, as military tension and mutual suspicion rise in Northeast Asia. The North Korean nuclear catalyst and the need to balance allied interests make this expanding nuclear dimension increasingly complex.

To improve mutual understanding of strategic stability and introduce the alliance element, Carnegie facilitated discussions between American, Chinese, and Japanese security experts. They focused on: a shared concept and definition of strategic stability; its purpose; and its establishment. While participants agreed on certain traditional characteristics of strategic stability, divergent views about the sources and possible remedies for currently fragile crisis and arms race stability will be difficult to bridge and do not bode well for the region, absent appropriate leadership attention.

The workshop highlighted four interconnected areas that will frustrate attempts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S.-China relations or U.S.-alliance concerns: the extent of linkage between regional/conventional conflict and the nuclear realm; Japan's role; perceptions of mutual vulnerability; and North Korea's role. Follow-on dialogue is recommended.

Findings and Recommendations

- The participants generally agreed that the United States is vulnerable to Chinese nuclear retaliation, but they disagreed over how Washington should respond, and the U.S.-Japan alliance is a driving factor behind this. Should the United States recognize this dynamic—thereby accepting it—or actively seek to limit such vulnerability?
- Japanese experts are concerned that the regional conventional military balance increasingly favors China. They further worry that U.S.-China strategic stability could lead to instability at the conventional level in Northeast Asia. These concerns might be ameliorated if China and Japan could explore confidence building measures and crisis management tools in the conventional military domain.
- North Korea's nuclear and missile programs are the most immediate and severe threat because allied countermeasures could stimulate a further Chinese response. Future U.S.-China-Japan dialogue might address North Korea-related issues of crisis management, missile defense, or military posture and exercises, implying that resolution of North Korean nuclear issues could result in a rollback of some allied and Chinese countermeasures.
- Restraint in general is underappreciated, because self-restraint or mutual restraint is difficult to measure and evaluate. If one country is taking a deterrence step it considers the least aggressive option available, it is still changing the status quo and will likely be viewed as an escalation. Mutual transparency for internal decisionmaking could help, facilitated by peacetime and crisis communication between the United States, China, and Japan.
- Future dialogues should continue to address some traditional topics, for example, offense-defense balance, tactical weapons, and strategic warning. Additionally, the emerging areas of cyber and space vis-à-vis nuclear issues, accurate signaling, and proportionality of responses are particularly fertile ground for discussion and collaborative research.

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