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# Engaging China on Strategic Stability and Mutual Vulnerability

George Perkovich



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## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Summary   | 1  |
| Introduction  | 3  |
| Background  | 5  |
| What's the Problem  | 6  |
| Defining Strategic Stability  | 7  |
| Acknowledging Mutual Vulnerability<br>and Exploring Its Implications      | 10 |
| Why Bother? Four Reasons  | 12 |
| Giving Practical Meaning to Mutual Vulnerability                          | 14 |
| Addressing the Three-Actor Challenge:<br>United States, China, and Russia | 18 |
| Conclusion  | 20 |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>About the Author</b>                           | <b>21</b> |
| <b>Notes</b>                                      | <b>23</b> |
| <b>Carnegie Endowment for International Peace</b> | <b>27</b> |

## Summary

The United States and Chinese governments, for the foreseeable future, will have the resources to keep each other's societies vulnerable to nuclear mass destruction. If these governments are not self-destructive, they will want to keep their competition from escalating into armed conflict that could lead to nuclear war. The constructs of strategic stability and mutual vulnerability can help significantly if both governments embrace them and interpret them similarly or even if the leaders of the two countries accurately understand how they differ in their perspectives on them.

Unfortunately, to date, on these issues the United States and China are like a quarrelling married couple who tried therapy for one or two appointments, found it dissatisfying, and then alternated in making excuses for not trying again, perhaps with a different therapist or format. Each says they have tried and the other doesn't listen or understand. Both suspect that the other isn't saying what they really feel or want; what they really feel is hostility and distrust and what they really want is to get richer and more powerful without being hassled or attacked. It would be easier if they could just go their separate ways, but the property and wealth they depend on will be lost (or at least severely diminished) if they split up or do each other harm.

This paper suggests that U.S. and allied interests require persistence in inviting China to dialogue on strategic stability; to demonstrate goodwill, the United States should acknowledge mutual vulnerability as a fact and necessary policy. The need for both moves is reflected in the fact that neither government has defined what it might mean by stability or mutual vulnerability.

To help test intentions and prompt harder thinking, the paper plays the role of therapist and offers definitions of both concepts—strategic stability and mutual vulnerability—so that the two sides can critique them more freely and without recrimination. These definitions are broader and deeper than usual, reflecting the growing problem of managing escalation of conventional conflict to nuclear war, the scenario that drives U.S. and Chinese concerns and military posturing. Further, broader definitions are necessary to comprehend the dangers stemming from the entanglement of conventional, cyber, and nuclear weapons and command and control systems.

The paper then sketches four benefits of declaring mutual vulnerability, contrary to opponents of the idea, before discussing steps that the United States and China could subsequently take to reflect and build each other's confidence in such a policy.

Finally, if perceived U.S. requirements in the future will be greater than the arsenal needed to deter or defeat Russia or China alone, how will Russia and China be persuaded not to try to build up to balance the additional U.S. force? In other words, if the United States is in two separate but interacting arms races (and deterrence relationships), how could each opponent (China and Russia) be persuaded to negotiate limits on their arsenal lower than the total the United States would insist on possessing to deter two nuclear opponents? Answers to these questions will affect strategic stability and mutual vulnerability of all parties but will take a long time to develop. To begin the process, the paper suggests asking Chinese leaders whether their silence on Putin's nuclear first-use threats means that China has changed its own policy on nuclear use or that it never took a no-first-use policy seriously in the first place. Is China concerned that the capabilities that the United States and its allies may develop to strengthen defenses against Russia could be used against China too, and if so, might arms control be a wiser approach?

Ultimately, the paper suggests that if China and the United States can sustain a process of serious dialogue, they will keep their relationship from worsening even if they cannot formally restrain their competition. And if dialogue leads one to ask the other for deeds to demonstrate goodwill, the paper has suggested some such deeds that could be undertaken with no security hazard and only slight political risk. No one should have the illusion that happiness is in this couple's future. All this work would be to allow a nonviolent cohabitation that is better than the alternative of destitute divorce or murder-suicide.

## Introduction

The politics of U.S.-China relations today largely preclude efforts to improve the relationship, and no therapist or outside mediator can help for now. Such stagnation is not a new historical phenomenon. Two powerful antagonists are pursuing competing interests, feeling slighted or endangered by each other's moves and misunderstood when they explain they are merely reacting to the other's ill will. Competition and threats of word and deed mount. In such situations, sometimes war results, sometimes one or both governments collapse or change, and sometimes leaders secretly talk through ways to lessen tensions and reassure each other that the worst will not happen. With China and the United States today, it is impossible to predict confidently where the mounting competition and threats will lead.

If and when U.S. and Chinese leaders decide their interests require steps to reduce the specter of offensive or inadvertent war, and perhaps to channel national resources to more productive purposes than arms racing, they will do so because they recognize that their countries are mutually vulnerable to nuclear annihilation and there is no technological escape from this condition. On the basis of this recognition, they will then need to reach a shared definition of strategic stability to guide their force acquisitions and actions and provide a framework for mutually beneficial diplomacy. These steps may not occur; outcomes other than a modus vivendi are quite possible. But if war is to be avoided and relations to be tolerably stable, then explicit reckoning with mutual vulnerability and strategic stability must occur. This paper seeks to encourage this reckoning sooner rather than later, while understanding that current politics favor later rather than sooner.

The need to assess whether a relatively stable *modus vivendi* can be explicitly framed and negotiated is more acute now that China is building hundreds of new silos that could house missiles that can target most of the United States and carry enough nuclear warheads to at least double China's current arsenal.<sup>1</sup> The probability of war, peace, political-economic turmoil, or managed competition depends on the strategic intent behind this growing force. One way to assess that intent is to probe whether there are conditions under which China would be willing to negotiate limits on its coercive actions and growing military power. Yet, U.S. administrations have not detailed what they would be willing to offer that could plausibly motivate Chinese leaders to change the current course.

U.S. allies—especially Australia, Japan, and South Korea—will be pivotal in encouraging both the United States and China to explore the possibilities of negotiated restraints. These allies could encourage the United States and China to enter a diplomatic pathway to this end in ways that would buttress the political case for an administration to do so. Conversely, allied opposition would discourage Washington. Yet today it is unreasonable to expect experts and officials of allied governments to have clear ideas or views on these issues when neither Washington nor Beijing does.

This paper explores how the United States, with allies' support, could fairly test China's intentions after the dust settles from the November National Conference of the Chinese Communist Party. The need for doing so is reflected in the admirably candid and experienced words of a former U.S. defense official, Brad Roberts:

Where U.S. experts generally see shared interests in strategic stability, leaders in Russia and China see competing interests (they believe the U.S. to be seeking Absolute Security 'at the expense of others'). Where U.S. experts see mutual benefit in cooperation, they see an America unwilling to cooperate on anything but its own self-serving terms. Where U.S. experts see value in dialogue, the leaders in Russia and China see dialogue blocked by 'cold war thinking' and American hubris. . . . U.S. experts have done a better job of explaining why Russian and Chinese restraint is in the U.S. interest than in setting out ideas about a deal that would be mutually beneficial for all.<sup>2</sup>

Inasmuch as U.S. officials have not defined strategic stability or the important related concept of mutual vulnerability, this article offers heuristic definitions of these concepts as grist for Chinese, American, and allied experts and officials to mill.<sup>3</sup> It then suggests further steps that could be considered if Chinese leaders signaled interest in strategic stability. All of this runs against the current politics of policy discussions in Washington and Beijing and in relations between the two governments. The idea is to prepare an alternative pathway in case leaders decide to change course.

## Background

Between 1971 and 2013, when Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power, the U.S.-China relationship mixed cooperation and relatively mild competition without the ominous thrust and tone of current discourse and policymaking. All along, the United States and its allies have sought to motivate China to conduct economic and military relations according to international norms and rules made between 1945 and, roughly, 2000. Today, as China's assertiveness grows, Washington and its allies primarily seek to defend their interests against what they perceive to be a growing Chinese propensity to coerce and steal intellectual property from them.

China does not accept the territorial and political status quo in Asia. China wants a more powerful role in writing the rules and managing the international system. (The so-called rules-based international order that American and allied governments and businesses largely created is not necessarily the one that Chinese counterparts would have designed.) China's leaders and probably most of the citizenry feel that China's size, economic success, and political stability entitle it to a greater rule-making role. They bridle at any notion that China must make concessions to be recognized and treated as a great power on matters of global importance.

The United States and its allies, on one side, and China, on the other, all perceive themselves as defensively oriented. Each side perceives the other to be seeking enough superiority to achieve (or retain) regional hegemony. China sees Taiwan as an internal affair, as affirmed by the 1979 mutual recognition agreement between the United States and China. Hence, China sees its acquisition of capabilities to prevent the breaking away of Taiwan as defensive. The United States and its partners see China's increasing capabilities as intended to bring about forceful absorption of Taiwan and see themselves to be defensively protecting Taiwan's freedom. Similar differences in perspective affect disputes over islands, reefs, and maritime resources in the South and East China Seas, though these are less strategically fraught than Taiwan.

For decades, the United States enjoyed military superiority over China; Chinese leaders eventually felt the need to revise the imbalance. If either the United States or China seeks military superiority over the other, then stability will be especially difficult to achieve, so long as the United States and China remain wealthy and politically functional enough to sustain robust militaries. If either antagonist seeks to deny the others' nuclear deterrent, crises will be especially dangerous, and arms racing will be hard to avoid or manage stably. (Regime change in either country probably would not be stabilizing until the longer-term trajectory of either polity were clearer.)

## What's the Problem?

Actors who want to ameliorate or stabilize competition can take unilateral measures that signal relatively benign intent and build mutual confidence. To create still more stability, actors can pursue the predictability that negotiated confidence-building measures and restraint can provide. Negotiations can help test or demonstrate whether the competitors truly are acting defensively and not seeking military means to upset the status quo. If one side rejects reasonably balanced proposals or, more tellingly, is not even willing to explore them, then the others can conclude that it is not interested in stability. Alternatively, if restraints can be negotiated and sustained, they provide predictability that enhances stability. Such predictability can reassure each party that it will have time to react if the other(s) become more offensive. Arms control can also limit or reduce military expenditures and the potential damage that could occur in the event of war.

All of this is relatively well known. So, too, is the fact that the United States and its allies and China have not yet created the basic conditions necessary to pursue negotiated restraints, especially nuclear arms control. China's intense effort now to narrow the long-standing gap between its nuclear arsenal and that of the United States makes the United States the demander. But, notwithstanding decades of invitations to nuclear dialogue, it has thus far failed to offer anything that could plausibly induce Chinese leaders to see benefit in engaging on arms control.

For example, the undersecretary of state who led the U.S. President Donald Trump administration's effort to pull China into arms control offered this incentive: "If China wants to be a great power . . . it must demonstrate the will and the ability to reverse its destabilizing nuclear buildup."<sup>4</sup> Chinese audiences can barely hide their bitter amusement.<sup>5</sup> U.S. officials do not determine whether China is a great power. China's wealth, military capacity, and cohesion do. China is only seeking to correct the imbalance in nuclear weaponry that the United States and Russia refused to reduce. Moreover, it is implausible now to believe that sixty-seven senators would vote to ratify an arms control treaty with China unless it one-sidedly advantaged the United States. Why would China agree even to discuss arms control on this premise?

As Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry Fu Cong put it:

Arms control that aims at increasing one's own security at the expense of the security of others is neither acceptable nor sustainable. Over the past century, despite the changes in arms control both in terms of content and paradigm, the basic international consensus has always been that maintaining strategic balance and stability should be a basic principle of arms control. However, what the United States has done in recent years has violated this basic principle. Its real intention is to negate the checks and balances between the major powers and establish a uni-polar world.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that these words were spoken by a Chinese diplomat does not make them untrue. It's natural that governments of major powers seek advantage in their negotiations. The balance of power, diplomatic skill, and each leadership's prioritization of multiple interests determines whether negotiations fail or reach agreement, and whether agreements are balanced enough to endure.

History suggests how difficult this is. Only the United States and Russia among all nuclear-armed states have negotiated nuclear arms control agreements. These negotiations were long and arduous. When agreements were reached, some were then not ratified, some were violated by Russia (such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty most recently), and some were abrogated by the United States (such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty most portentously).

Chinese leaders—even if China were to become an electoral democracy—are not going to begin discussions on transparency or arms control if they think the United States is seeking to weaken or prevent China from closing the long-standing gap between the two countries' strategic military capabilities.<sup>7</sup> The United States has proffered nuclear or strategic dialogue for years, but it has never displayed interest in anything like parity with China or significant limits on U.S. missile defenses, leaving the impression that the U.S. aim is to preserve military superiority and hegemony.

Conversely, now that China is building up its capabilities, American and allied leaders are wary that Xi's intentions are offensive (to absorb Taiwan by whatever means necessary) and that negotiations over confidence-building and arms control would just be a tactic to buy time for China to build more military power. What's the point of proposing strategic dialogue yet again if Chinese leaders reject it? It is more prudent to build allied strength and compete harder to demonstrate that China would be better off if it stopped coercing neighbors and threatening Taiwan with forceful unification.

## Defining Strategic Stability

To create an alternative to unbounded arms racing and worst-case insecurity, China and the United States and its allies must first gain basic confidence that they understand each other's core interests and whether and when they would use military force to pursue them. How does each leadership and national power center perceive the strategic environment, their own objectives, and the intentions and capabilities of their foreign competitors? Neither side is going to negotiate over arms control or otherwise reduce the threats it poses if it does not have some confidence that the answers to these questions are benign or can be made benign through nonmilitary means. (Whatever happens in the Ukraine war, I think trilateral official dialogue or negotiations among the United States, Russia, and China will be infeasible until after bilateral U.S.-China dialogue has made significant progress.)

This is a chicken and egg problem. Both sides need to know what the terms of dialogue would be before they can decide whether it's in their interest, but they need a dialogue to define and convey what their interests are in talking with each other. Many American officials and experts feel that they have offered such dialogue and been rejected by Chinese leaders. However, notwithstanding many Track 1.5 and 2 discussions, it is possible that apex leaders in China (who are asymmetrically important) have not heard what, concretely, the United States has in mind. Informed observers say, in private if not publicly, that this is because the U.S. government has not resolved within its agencies and parties what it has in mind. The individuals and institutions that drive U.S. policy toward China prioritize more assertive political, economic, and military approaches and see arms control as a fetish of powerless NGOs and diplomats.

A politically affordable and realpolitik way for both sides to proceed could be for each to proffer what it means by "strategic stability." This term is often mentioned but rarely defined and perhaps never discussed by senior officials of the United States and China.<sup>8</sup> There must be some reason why the two governments have not proffered such definitions and engaged senior officials in exploring whether they can be reconciled in part. Maybe it would be easier if both could critique someone else's definition. In this heuristic spirit, I posit layered definitions of "strategic stability" and invite Chinese, American, and allied officials to comment on them.

A comprehensive understanding of strategic stability could mean that the United States would not try to subvert the Chinese government or act to cause regime change. The United States would not encourage or defend moves by Taiwan toward independence. For its part, China would not clandestinely interfere in the internal affairs of its neighbors nor physically change the status quo in the administration of any territory, including Taiwan. Strategic stability also would entail clear and observed codes of conduct by navies, coast guards, and fishing enterprises around disputed maritime boundaries and islands. U.S. allies would be secure so long as they also did not seek to change the status quo regarding any disputed territory or maritime area.

From the standpoint of today's increasingly acrimonious relationship, the biggest changes would be Washington's clear commitment not to interfere in Chinese domestic affairs and governance and Beijing's clear commitment that it will not use force against Taiwan so long as Taiwan does not declare independence. This is very difficult insofar as most Americans object to the Chinese Communist Party's governance and treatment of dissidents and minorities, including Uyghurs and Tibetans. For their part, Chinese Communist Party leaders and state-controlled and -monitored media and social media treat unification of Taiwan and the mainland as a national imperative that must be fulfilled soon. It seems politically impossible for American (and Taiwanese) leaders to publicly prioritize peace over advocacy of freedom and human rights in ways that Chinese leaders will believe; it is similarly difficult to imagine Chinese leaders reassuring counterparts through words and deeds that China will desist from forcibly unifying Taiwan. If official or Track 2 dialogues do not make progress in ameliorating these underlying tensions, it is difficult to see how a

shared working understanding of strategic stability could be created. (Other issues, including trade, intellectual property protection, and climate change, will remain challenging even if the fundamentals of strategic stability can be built).

To see the value of strategic stability as defined above, imagine for a moment that China and the United States (with allies) embraced this conception and a crisis erupted despite declared restraints. Stability would mean that both the United States and China would be determined to resolve the crisis without use of force and that each would have some confidence that the other shared an interest in such restraint. If that failed and crisis erupted into conflict, stability would mean that neither side would think it could use nuclear weapons first and “win.” Instead, both leaderships would understand that any use of nuclear weapons would be most likely to lead to unacceptable damage to their own country (as I elaborate in a discussion of “mutual vulnerability” below).

This is a broader and deeper understanding of stability than what is often meant by “strategic stability”—the mutually recognized absence of incentives to initiate nuclear use.<sup>9</sup> This deeper definition recognizes the problem of managing escalation of conventional conflict to nuclear war, which is the scenario that drives U.S. and Chinese concerns and military posturing. Further, a broader definition like this comprehends the danger stemming from the entanglement of conventional, cyber, and nuclear weapons and command and control systems. That is, weapons and command, control, and communication systems used for fighting conventional wars are also, to varying extents, relied upon to manage nuclear forces. One side may spy on (with cyber tools) or attack the other’s assets without intending to attack its nuclear capabilities, but because of entanglement the other side may (mis)perceive it and feel pressure to respond with nuclear operations. This entanglement increases the risk that any armed conflict could escalate—perhaps inadvertently—to nuclear use.

What do Chinese leaders or experts think of definitions like those offered above? Do they have alternatives and, if so, when and how would they be interested in engaging American and allied counterparts in exploring them? American leaders have long urged China to engage in dialogue on strategic stability but have not defined what they mean by it—how would they alter the definition offered above? Given the polarization of American politics, Chinese leaders would also be curious to know how influential Democratic and Republican Party figures differ in their definitions and approaches to strategic stability with China. Meanwhile, if Chinese leaders do not engage meaningfully on these issues and questions, they should expect American and allied counterparts to conclude that China has no interest in mutual confidence-building and restraint.

## Acknowledging Mutual Vulnerability and Exploring Its Implications

One way to invite a more positive Chinese response to strategic stability dialogue could be to pick up on a concept that Chinese experts have emphasized: “mutual vulnerability.” Relevant Americans and allied experts and officials have long debated the risks versus benefits of acknowledging and basing policy on mutual vulnerability. David Santoro and Pacific Forum International have recently published an excellent collection of essays on this topic, “US-China Mutual Vulnerability: Perspectives on the Debate.”<sup>10</sup> But, remarkably, neither proponents nor opponents of the mutual vulnerability framework define it—whether in the United States, allied countries, or China.<sup>11</sup> This lack of discussion and shared understanding of a key concept repeats the problem surrounding strategic stability.

Here, too, I offer a definition to heuristically stimulate international thinking and dialogue. Mutual vulnerability could mean that two countries or blocs cannot physically prevent each other from inflicting destruction of life and property in each other’s territory that is more costly to them than the value of the territory or stakes they are fighting over. It is important to emphasize both parts of the definition: the point is not merely that one side can’t prevent the other from detonating nuclear weapons on its territory or assets; it is that the cost of damage can be made greater than the value of the thing being fought over, especially for the instigator of the conflict.

This definition raises at least two revealing challenges. First, how do leaders determine “the value of the thing being fought over”? The decisionmaking authority to use nuclear weapons is clearly and narrowly reposed in one or two leaders. Depending on the political system involved, those leaders have varying tools they can use to win support for their valuations. In one-party systems there is no open political opposition and the public’s information environment can be controlled. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war against Ukraine exemplifies this dynamic. Conversely, in polities with open political contestation and free media, the prospect of nuclear war will heavily influence the valuation of things that might be fought over. This, too, can be seen in the U.S. President Joe Biden administration’s and NATO’s responses to Russian aggression against Ukraine. Some urge more fulsome intervention to drive Russian forces from Ukraine. Others, mindful of avoiding escalation to nuclear war, clarify that U.S. and NATO forces will not enter the conflict, but that NATO’s nuclear capabilities will deter Russia from attacking Ukraine’s supply lines. Recognizing that the nature of polities and leaders affects valuations of stakes in conflicts, the point remains that mutual vulnerability exists when both sides can sustain their capacity to quickly (in days, not months) inflict much greater losses on each other than they would experience by any alternative action, such as continuing conventional war or negotiating a ceasefire.

A second challenge immediately arises with this definition (and the phenomenon of nuclear deterrence). How does *mutual* vulnerability work if one side values the disputed territory or

stakes much more highly than the other? In that case, neither side can physically prevent the other's nuclear attack, but one side could care so much about what is being fought over that it could be willing to risk its existence over it, while the other side would find the immediate *casus belli* less important than avoiding mass destruction. The deterring effect of mutual vulnerability could be unequal, then, in ways that make the condition less stabilizing than it seems on the surface.

This is an inescapable paradox or uncertainty of deterrence, especially nuclear deterrence. One tempting but ultimately unsatisfying response is for each side to display a largely unqualified willingness to risk total destruction and thereby deter adversaries. With this approach, the invocation of nuclear weapons itself becomes a *deus ex machina* (or, less optimistically, a doomsday machine). But, because almost no adversary territory or regime change is worth the loss of the land and population one already possesses, rational and well-informed governments will only run the risk of nuclear devastation when they have no other way to defend against an adversary's massive aggression. Claiming a willingness to undertake national murder-suicide for lesser stakes, then, is not credible. This reality, in turn, invites some leaders to be or pretend to be madmen. U.S. President Richard Nixon did this in 1969 with the "madman alert" of U.S. nuclear forces, and Putin may be doing it in 2022.<sup>12</sup> (If both sides have decent, responsible leaders who value national survival over the territory or issue in dispute, they should both be able to avoid crises or conflict in the first place, mindful of the risks of inadvertent escalation.)

Another response when one side values the territory or issue at stake much more than the other does is to search for ways to limit nuclear war. Use of a relatively small number of weapons with relatively low yield on targets that are not the most vital for the opponent's leadership or nation could demonstrate resolve sufficient to motivate the other side to back down rather than escalate. This belief (or hope) that the other side would not escalate makes the threat to conduct such strikes seem more credible (rational) than threatening large strikes, which are likely to trigger murder-suicide exchanges. The United States and its allies now perceive China to be departing from earlier policies and acquiring capabilities for relatively limited nuclear war; China has long seen the United States as having such capabilities and plans.

No definition of mutual vulnerability, including the one I have offered above, can eliminate the uncertainty and instability produced by one or two sides' belief that they could use nuclear weapons in a limited fashion and deter or prevent the adversary from escalating in response.<sup>13</sup> The definition I offer would convey both sides' understanding that each will do what it must to retain the capacity to escalate the destruction it can cause on the other to intolerable levels. This could help deter both sides from believing that limited nuclear operations would allow them to win or avoid losing an escalating conventional war whose initial stakes were not high enough to warrant risking one's own national survival. In a rational world, this would motivate all parties involved to make the accommodations necessary to seek diplomatic and other measures to avert military confrontations or crises.

## Why Bother? Four Reasons

The main argument against declaring mutual vulnerability is that it would encourage Chinese assertiveness and discourage U.S. allies. In Matthew Costlow's words,

“This Chinese government would likely take it to mean the US intends to sacrifice any interests we have that conflict with China's and that would only encourage the irredentism China is already inclined toward and frighten US allies relying on our willingness to preserve the status quo in Asia against assertive Chinese claims.”<sup>14</sup>

Many Japanese defense specialists would concur. “It would likely give Beijing the sense that it can be more aggressive conventionally,” Masashi Murano writes, “and it would also likely require the United States to make significant concessions on its force posture.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet, Murano goes on to say, China “will likely become more assertive regardless of what Washington says about mutual vulnerability.” This prediction comports much better with what one detects in Chinese officials' speech and actions. Chinese officials think the United States aggressively seeks military superiority and maintenance of hegemony along with regime change in China. To believe that a declaration of mutual vulnerability would revise Chinese leaders' assessments of U.S. intentions and capabilities requires one to view Chinese leaders as naively credulous when dealing with their primary adversaries.

Rather than worry about Chinese leaders becoming emboldened by a nice declaration from Washington, American and allied experts would do well to concentrate on how to make an acknowledgement of the fact that mutual vulnerability serves allied national security interests. There are at least four reasons why it would be salutary to acknowledge mutual vulnerability and base policy on it.

First, basing policy on mutual vulnerability is realistic, and ignoring reality is generally not good for national security policymaking. It can foster delusional or reckless brinksmanship, risk-taking, and misdirected expenditure of resources. Observers such as Costlow may say that “‘mutual vulnerability’ is decidedly not about ‘recognizing reality.’ Instead, it is recognizing that reality is what the state makes of it.” But there is a reality that the United States and China have the means to build and deploy, if they choose to, offensive nuclear capabilities that could overwhelm any defenses and destroy so much of each other's military and socioeconomic infrastructure and environment that no one would dare declare victory. That China has not yet deployed capabilities on this scale does not mean that it could not.

Second, basing policy on the reality of mutual vulnerability is necessary if there is to be any hope of avoiding or limiting arms racing and worsening crisis instability between the United States and China. Brad Roberts persuasively argues, “the United States is going to have a relationship of mutual vulnerability, whether or not it accepts it in a political sense,”

but without clarity on this, the United States cannot devise a strategy for competing on U.S. terms and offering pathways to more stable relations through dialogue in ways that China and U.S. allies can comprehend.<sup>16</sup>

Third, admitting that mutual vulnerability is now a condition that cannot be escaped should encourage political factions in Washington and Canberra, Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo to devote more thought, money, and action to strengthening non-nuclear defenses and diplomatic initiatives to restrain China. The highest force-acquisition priorities should be improving resilience of C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance), air and naval logistics, survivability of airplanes on bases, and antisubmarine warfare capabilities.<sup>17</sup> The odds of winning a nuclear war with China are not high enough to risk taking that course unless and until every other alternative has been tried in advance—such as more conventional deterrents and diplomacy, among others. Indeed, none of the critics of accepting mutual vulnerability have explained how nuclear war would be kept limited—how escalation would be avoided. For example, Murano writes that “the US government should be prepared to control escalation even in the event of Russia’s blackmail,” but neither he nor anyone else can say with confidence how that would be done.<sup>18</sup> To his credit, Murano goes on to emphasize the need to increase Japanese defense spending and focus on strengthening alliance conventional and naval law enforcement forces to contest unacceptably coercive practices by the China Coast Guard.

Fourth, basing policy on mutual vulnerability would demonstrate to Chinese audiences and, more importantly, the rest of the world that the United States is willing to pursue dialogue and diplomacy with China—rather than hegemonic diktat—to avert war, including nuclear war, and to stabilize relations. This tests, or puts the onus on, Chinese leaders to engage in meaningful dialogue that clarifies their intentions and enables the future negotiation of stability-enhancing measures. If they refuse to engage seriously, the United States, its allies, and the rest of the world will know that greater effort must be devoted to countering China’s power and offensive actions. If Chinese leaders want the United States and its allies not to build up their conventional and/or nuclear military capabilities against China, Beijing will need to engage constructively in confidence-building and arms control. And if U.S. and allied leaders want China to do that instead of ever-more arms building, they will need to convince Chinese leaders that they will negotiate more equitable power balances than previously imagined.

When American and allied leaders agree that mutual vulnerability needs to be the basis of nuclear policy toward China, debate will ensue whether to declare it without negotiation with China or, instead, only through a negotiation in which China gave something in return. Lewis Dunn, in David Santoro’s edited volume, provides an excellent discussion of the pros and cons of various tactical approaches.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, a negotiated joint declaration on mutual vulnerability and subsequent steps to explore and act on its implications would be optimal. But China’s position of not paying for an acknowledgement of reality is stronger than the U.S. and allied position. Thus, any negotiation for concessions by China in return for such an acknowledgment would take a very long time at best. Instead, I argue it would

behoove the United States and allied countries to test China's intention now and display a forthcomingness that could garner international support. If China rejected invitations to follow on strategic dialogue and confidence-building measures, the United States and its allies would have a much clearer and stronger basis for mobilizing national and international support to counter China's growing capabilities and gray zone activities.

## Giving Practical Meaning to Mutual Vulnerability

If the United States and China declared their mutual vulnerability and acknowledged that it is futile and counterproductive to try to escape from this condition, then what? What would need to be done to make such a declaration beneficial to both countries, U.S. allies, and arguably the rest of the world?

Various initiatives could be undertaken. Some would primarily involve words—explanatory dialogue. Some would include deeds. Overall, the objective would be to clarify what each side means by strategic stability and mutual vulnerability and how each is living up to its declarations.

For example, China must wonder about apparent U.S. intentions to obtain or retain military superiority over China (and others). The United States Air Force proclaims its mission is to achieve and maintain “space superiority/supremacy” against all adversaries.<sup>20</sup> The United States at various times has sought nuclear superiority over Russia; given how much less capable China's nuclear arsenal was, superiority over China was assumed. Some Chinese worst-case observers have perceived the United States' combined forces as capable of conducting cyber attacks, non-nuclear missile attacks, and nuclear attacks against China's relatively small nuclear deterrent while ballistic missile defenses (unfettered after the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty) operate to counter Chinese nuclear weapons that survived such a U.S. preemptive first strike. These capabilities, plus official and scholarly statements in favor of “damage-limitation,” “counterforce,” and “nuclear superiority,” lead some Chinese officials and observers to conclude that the United States seeks to involve China in arms control to preserve overall military superiority over China.<sup>21</sup> Dialogue would need to address such concerns and clarify what strategic stability means in practice.

Conversely, observers in Australia, the United States, and Japan and other Asian countries see China's increasing projection of economic and military power—including its nuclear buildup—as a bid to ultimately replace the United States as a regional hegemon. Indeed, this

may be quite natural for a country of China's size, history, and capabilities. But states that do not welcome the prospect of excessive Chinese power over their lives (or over territory they believe to be theirs) will understandably resist this. Given the death, destruction, and enduring trauma of war, everyone would be better off if they found nonviolent ways to accommodate each other's interests. This is the deeper implication of mutual vulnerability. Do Chinese and American officials agree? If so, what are they doing to manifest it? If not, why not?

For stability to be enhanced, each state needs to have increased confidence that its competitor(s) will not surprise it with new military capabilities that could overwhelm its deterrents and defenses. At a minimum this requires communication among the states regarding existing and planned nuclear forces. Optimally, agreements could be made so that the parties could at least partially verify each other's declarations (without on-site inspections, which are infeasible now).

China has long resisted such communication and transparency. Chinese officials have said that providing information on nuclear capabilities and plans would help enable the United States to target China's small nuclear deterrent force: if the United States knew how many nuclear weapons of what type China possesses, it would be easier for American forces to plan preemptive counterforce attacks backed by missile defenses to destroy enough of China's arsenal to enable the United States to meaningfully win a war. China's government, like many one-party states, also avoids transparency for political reasons.

The rapid buildup of China's nuclear arsenal should alleviate worries about U.S. preemptive attacks on China's deterrent. This could create a better basis for dialogue on both sides' plans for future offensive and defensive strategic forces (including all types of nuclear weapons). The United States and its allies should at least make this case to top Chinese leaders as a test of their intentions. Chinese diplomats tend to be disconnected from military policy and action; the United States should direct questions to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and to Xi's apparatus. If these officials—military or civilian—refuse to meaningfully discuss the conditions under which they would exchange information, then it would be reasonable for everyone to conclude that China does not seek stability through diplomacy. Indeed, the United States should at least coordinate with allies in Asia and Europe to highlight constructive offers of dialogue with Beijing and the responses China makes in return. Washington could also welcome allied requests to participate in strategic dialogues with China.

Moving from explanatory words to military deeds and hardware, stable deterrence of offensive actions requires a balance of military capabilities and improved political confidence that neither side will initiate physical coercion.

At the lowest rung of a potential escalation ladder, this means the United States and China's regional counterparts must strengthen capabilities to deter or defend against encroachment by China's Coast Guard, PLA Navy, and commercial fishing fleets in disputed waters

contrary to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Deterring and defending against gray-zone probing by China deserves more attention and resources by the United States, Japan, and other states. Money and time would be better spent on these capabilities and operations than on building a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile, which would be redundant and would undermine conventional naval operations.

The most alarming weapon threat facing Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States is the proliferation of short- and intermediate-range missiles. China's missiles carry a mix of nuclear and conventional warheads, but most missile warheads elsewhere in the region will be conventional. With the end of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, some people urge the United States to deploy (or consider deploying) conventionally armed land-based missiles of this range in East Asia to bolster deterrence against China. Meanwhile, the increased number and salience of missiles (including in North Korea) drives increased investment in missile defenses.

It would be advisable for the United States, China, and other regional players to organize discussions of how missile proliferation is affecting stability in the region and whether/how missile defenses can be stabilizing or destabilizing.<sup>22</sup> If such discussions gain traction, they could explore whether Chinese officials—especially military ones—see any interest in region-wide limitations (including for Russia) on deployments of missile systems of this range. Which countries would they expect to be involved in such limitations? Would missile defenses need to be part of any negotiated limits? How would or should North Korea factor into such considerations? Chinese leaders are far from ready to conduct arms control negotiations; the objective here would be to show the world whether China is even willing to discuss in detail how destabilizing regional arms racing involving nuclear and non-nuclear offensive and defensive capabilities can be avoided.

Taking this logic further, the United States and China both worry about cyber threats to their nuclear C4ISR systems. Such threats, which may be difficult to detect and interpret, could undermine each country's confidence in its deterrent and exacerbate the worst assumptions about the adversary's likely aggressiveness early in a conflict. Because some command, control, and communication capabilities are used for conventional as well as nuclear operations, there is a risk that one state might intend to cyber attack the adversary's conventional forces, but the recipient could perceive the attack as the beginning of nuclear war.

Many commentators thus urge both states to commit not to conduct cyber operations against each other's nuclear command and control systems. Unfortunately, this is an unlikely solution for several reasons. The United States and China use cyber tools to gather intelligence on each other's systems; to the extent that elements of these systems serve both conventional and nuclear forces, the two countries are unlikely to forswear any cyber espionage against them and are probably unsure how to limit such espionage only to the conventional elements of the command systems. These considerations add to the doubts that leaders in both countries would have about their adversary living up to any commitment not to conduct cyber operations.

Instead of technically and politically dubious pledges, Chinese and American leaders could build confidence by communicating the steps they are taking within their own systems to subject all sensitive cyber operations to robust oversight and risk management protocols. As a joint Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies project recommended in 2021,

Assessment and control procedures should operate at five levels:

1. domestic and foreign policy oversight by competent national authority;
2. technical oversight to assess the intended effects and potential unintended consequences of cyber operations;
3. operational oversight to verify positive control within an authorized chain of command;
4. intelligence oversight to assess the consequences of exposure and potential loss of intelligence sources and methods, as well as how the insights will be affected if the cyber operation or capability is discovered or revealed; [and]
5. legal oversight to assess both the capability and the operation as it applies to applicable domestic and international laws and agreements.

All of this could be done unilaterally and in secrecy. But bilateral dialogue on these issues could produce additional benefits and help build mutual confidence.<sup>23</sup>

Discussion of these issues would provide constructive substance to U.S.-China dialogue on strategic stability and/or mutual vulnerability.

Finally, space is rapidly becoming the most dynamic frontier of major power competition. State and commercial actors in the United States and China are or will soon be the most numerous and active competitors. Perhaps the most urgent need is to reduce risks of debris-causing events that would threaten everyone's right to benefit from the space commons.

One step in this direction would be a ban on kinetic energy tests against satellites. The United States in April 2022 announced a unilateral moratorium on "destructive, direct-ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) missile testing."<sup>24</sup> U.S. allies should be encouraged to make similar commitments and, in turn, to urge China and, less likely, Russia to do the same.

Another confidence-building measure would be for China, Russia, and the United States to make a joint political commitment to establish keep-out zones around their high-altitude satellites. Each could commit to maintain minimum separation distances between its satellites and the satellites in high-altitude orbits that belong to other participants.<sup>25</sup>

Military communication and early-warning satellites in high-altitude orbits play critical roles in nuclear communications, command, control, and intelligence (C3I) systems. A repositioning operation that brought a satellite into proximity with one involved in nuclear operations could be misconstrued as preparation for an attack. Moreover, many satellites involved in nuclear operations are dual use. As a result, in a conventional conflict, they might be attacked in an attempt to disrupt non-nuclear operations being conducted by their possessor. Such attacks on space-based nuclear C3I capabilities would risk being interpreted as preparations for nuclear war—potentially sparking catastrophic escalation.

One key political challenge is that China and Russia appear to want the ability to hold U.S. satellites in high-altitude orbits at risk. However, as they are investing heavily in their own high-altitude military satellites, including for nuclear C3I, they may be interested in establishing keep-out zones that would clarify actors' intentions and buy time for responses if an actor moved an object into one's keep-out zone.

## Addressing the Three-Actor Challenge: United States, China, and Russia

China long has urged other nuclear-armed states to join it in declaring no first use of nuclear weapons and has insisted that China cannot be expected to engage in nuclear arms control processes before the United States and Russia reduce their nuclear forces to much closer to China's level. The United States and Russia did achieve major reductions through five agreements—the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START) I and II, the Moscow Treaty, and New START. (These reductions were not made to address Chinese concerns, but this is less important than the amount of destructive power that has been removed.)

Now China is building up rapidly, and the president of its “most important strategic partner,” Russia, has made numerous threats of nuclear first use in the Ukraine war.<sup>26</sup> It is reasonable for Australia, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and others to ask senior Chinese leaders how they think about Putin's nuclear threat-making and how to bring Russia into discussions on averting a more intense and expensive arms race between China, Russia, and the United States and its allies.

Does silence on Putin's nuclear first-use threats mean that China has changed its own policy on nuclear use or that it never took no-first-use seriously? Is China concerned that capabilities the United States and its allies may develop to strengthen defenses against Russia could be used against China too, and if so, might arms control be a wiser approach? How do Chinese military and civilian leaders think about bringing Russia into discussions on strategic stability and arms control?

American and allied officials are increasingly feeling the need to develop plans and capabilities to potentially deter and defeat simultaneous conflicts with Russia and China. In worst-case thinking, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and China's response to it suggest the possibility that presidents like Putin and Xi—or similarly minded successors—could be tempted to undertake parallel military campaigns along Russia's periphery and against Taiwan to overwhelm the United States' capacity to defend its allies in each region. Quickly won military gains by Russia or China could then be more readily defended as it would take time for the United States to recover and muster the will and capacity to return and fight to expel the aggressor. The spectrum of potential conflict here ranges from small territorial incursions to local hostilities after a skirmish or accidents between adversaries' naval vessels or aircraft all the way to major invasions. All of this may be worst-case thinking, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shocked European and Asian defense officials into more vigilance.

U.S. and allied defense experts and policymakers are now asking:

Are there adjustments to U.S. and allied non-nuclear capabilities and operational plans that could enable the United States with a nuclear arsenal of roughly 2,000 weapons (as of today) to confidently deter and threaten to defeat Russia and China? Does the marginal gain in deterrence effectiveness that each additional nuclear weapon of one type or another might provide justify the direct and opportunity costs of that weapon, or would other moves more cost-effectively buttress deterrence? If U.S. requirements in the future will be greater than the arsenal needed to deter or defeat Russia or China alone, how will Russia and China be persuaded not to try to build up to balance the additional U.S. force? In other words, if the United States is in two separate-but-interacting arms races (and deterrence relationships), how could each opponent (China and Russia) be persuaded to negotiate limits on their arsenal lower than the total the United States would insist on to deter two nuclear opponents?<sup>27</sup>

These questions are written from a U.S. perspective, but China clearly has an interest in how they are answered conceptually and materially. Answers will deeply affect prospects of strategic stability, deterrence (mutual vulnerability), and war between China and the United States and its allies. If China continues to avoid dialogue on these issues, it will increase the probability that the United States and allies will act according to worst-case assumptions about China's intentions and future capabilities. If the United States and allies do not clarify what they mean by strategic stability and mutual vulnerability and offer proposals of confidence-building and arms limitations that would leave China better off than it would be with no such agreements, then China will compete accordingly, and the United States will find it harder to rally global opinion to its side.

## Conclusion

The U.S. and Chinese governments, for the foreseeable future, will have the resources to keep each other's society vulnerable to nuclear mass destruction. (Contrary to some Americans' fantasies, China will not bankrupt itself arms racing the United States). If these governments are not self-destructive, they will want to keep their competition from escalating into armed conflict that could lead to nuclear war. The constructs of strategic stability and mutual vulnerability can help significantly if both governments embrace them and interpret them similarly. Even if the two governments don't embrace them, these concepts can help a little if leaders of the two countries accurately understand how they differ in their perspectives on them.

Unfortunately, to date the United States and China are like a quarrelling married couple who tried therapy for one or two appointments, found it dissatisfying, and then alternated in making excuses for not trying again, perhaps with a different therapist or format. Each says they have tried and the other doesn't listen or understand. Both suspect that the other isn't saying what they really feel or want; what they really feel is hostility and distrust and what they really want is to get richer and more powerful without being hassled or attacked. It would be easier if they could just go their separate ways, but the property and wealth they depend on will be lost (or at least severely diminished) if they split up or do each other harm.

This paper has suggested that the United States and its allies have interests in persisting in inviting China to dialogue on strategic stability, and to demonstrate goodwill, the United States should acknowledge mutual vulnerability as a fact and necessary policy. To help test Chinese and American experts' and officials' intentions, the paper, playing the role of therapist, offers definitions of both concepts so that the two sides can critique them more freely and without recrimination.

If China and the United States can sustain such a process of serious dialogue, they will keep their relationship from worsening even if they cannot formally restrain their competition. And if dialogue leads one to ask the other for deeds to demonstrate goodwill, the paper has suggested some that could be undertaken with no security hazard and only slight political risk. No one should have the illusion that happiness is in this couple's future. All this work would be to allow a non-violent cohabitation that is better than the alternative of destitute divorce or murder-suicide.

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## About the Author

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## Notes

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