

Managing Strategic Risk with China

Why Dialogue Still Matters in an Era of Nuclear Modernization and Cross-Domain Competition

By David F. Helvey

The United States and China have spent decades building, suspending, restoring, and redesigning channels intended to make a dangerous strategic relationship more manageable. The recurring difficulty has rarely been due to a shortage of mechanisms. Instead, it has been a more basic disagreement over what dialogue is supposed to accomplish.

Washington has generally treated military and strategic dialogue as a tool for managing competition, especially when relations are strained. Beijing has more often treated dialogue as part of the broader political relationship: engagement expands when the relationship improves and contracts when political tensions rise. That difference has shaped military-to-military contacts, crisis communications, strategic stability discussions, and efforts to address nuclear risk.

This article revisits the origins and consequences of that divergence as the U.S. and China explore ways to “build a constructive relationship of strategic stability based on fairness and reciprocity” and embark on a fresh round of military-to-military dialogues to [“coordinate, deconflict, and reduce the risk of miscalculation.”](#) The stakes could not be higher. China is undertaking the [largest expansion and modernization of its nuclear forces](#) in its history. At the same time, conventional precision strike, cyber operations, space systems, missile defense, artificial intelligence, and autonomous capabilities increasingly intersect with, and complicate, the management of nuclear deterrence. The strategic relationship is therefore becoming more fraught with danger at the same moment the two governments launch a new consultative process while continuing to disagree about the purposes, vocabulary, and political conditions of risk-reduction dialogue.

The implication is straightforward: the United States should

continue to pursue substantive strategic engagement with China, but it should define success for itself more realistically. Near-term progress, for example, is unlikely to resemble Cold War arms control negotiations. A more useful objective is to reduce the risk that either side misreads the other’s doctrine, intentions, or actions during a crisis, while building habits and concepts that could support more ambitious measures over time. Dialogue cannot remove the underlying competition, but it can help keep miscalculation from becoming irreversible.

The Dialogue Problem Is Strategic, Not Procedural

The United States has long approached military dialogue with China from an intuition shaped in part by the Cold War: nuclear-armed competitors have an interest in maintaining communication precisely because they do not trust one another. That logic remains visible in U.S. descriptions of defense contacts with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). When Washington and Beijing resumed senior defense engagements in 2024, for example, the Department of Defense [emphasized open lines of communication](#) as a means of preventing competition from veering into conflict.

China’s approach has historically reflected a different logic. Beijing often links military engagement to the condition of the overall political relationship and has suspended or narrowed

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defense contacts in response to disputes elsewhere in the relationship. From the U.S. perspective, that removes communication when it is most valuable. From Beijing's perspective, continued engagement can appear to insulate Washington from the political consequences of actions China opposes.

This difference is closely related to the distinction between [crisis management and crisis prevention](#). U.S. officials often begin with the problem of managing a dangerous encounter: How can the two sides clarify intentions, maintain communications, and keep an incident from escalating? Chinese officials often move one step backward and ask what produced the dangerous situation in the first place. The difficulty is that Beijing frequently locates the source of instability in military and security cooperation activities that Washington maintains are lawful, necessary, or central to its regional commitments, including forward military presence, intelligence collection, alliance activities, and support for partners.

The result is a persistent conceptual gap. Both governments can endorse “stability” while assigning responsibility for instability in fundamentally different ways. Both can support “risk reduction” while disagreeing over whether the appropriate remedy is better crisis communication or a change in the underlying military activity. The hardest problems in U.S.-China military relations therefore emerge after the agenda moves beyond procedures and begins to expose different theories of security.

Strategic Stability with China Will Not Be a Replay of the Cold War

The same problem appears in discussions of strategic stability and nuclear risk. Washington has sought such exchanges with Beijing for decades. The purpose has often been modest: improve understanding of doctrine, force development, escalation dynamics, and the interaction between nuclear and conventional capabilities. Yet U.S. expectations often carry an implicit analogy to the U.S.-Soviet experience.

That analogy is useful only up to a point. Thomas Schelling's work remains foundational because it treated deterrence as a problem of bargaining, perception, risk, and communication rather than a simple comparison of weapons. [Recent reflections on Schelling](#) also underscore the limits of treating “strategic stability” as a fixed or universally shared condition, particularly as emerging technologies complicate escalation and blur boundaries between conventional and strategic assets and between red lines that once appeared more distinct.

The structural circumstances of the U.S.-China nuclear relationship differ substantially from the mature U.S.-Soviet competition. The United States and Soviet Union negotiated

many of their most consequential arms-control arrangements after they had built very large arsenals and approached rough strategic parity. For decades, China occupied a different position: [it maintained a much smaller force while facing two nuclear superpowers](#), underwritten with a stated nuclear doctrine of no-first use, and credible minimum deterrence. Under those conditions, opacity could serve a strategic purpose. Detailed disclosure about force structure, locations, doctrine, or readiness was seen in Beijing as reducing the survivability of a smaller deterrent rather than reassuring an adversary.

This helps explain a recurring divergence. Washington tends to seek transparency as a way to reduce uncertainty. Beijing has often preserved uncertainty because some uncertainty can contribute to deterrence. Washington has wanted to discuss forces, doctrine, and capabilities. Beijing has often preferred to discuss the strategic environment it believes drives those forces and capabilities.

Neither approach is irrational. They rest on different judgments about what produces stability. The practical mistake is to assume that the institutional forms developed for a different strategic relationship can simply be transplanted into this one. Doing so risks turning engagement into a cycle of ambitious proposals, predictable rejection, and mutual recrimination.

Modernization Is Changing the Risk Equation

The asymmetry that shaped China's traditional approach is changing. In its 2025 annual report to Congress, the Department of Defense estimated that China possessed more than 600 operational nuclear warheads by mid-2024 and [projected that its arsenal would exceed 1,000 operational warheads by 2030](#). The expansion includes new silo fields and a broader mix of delivery systems.

Numbers alone do not explain what China intends to do with a larger and more diverse force. Chinese nuclear strategy has long emphasized assured retaliation and a declared no-first-use policy. Scholars examining Chinese-language sources have [cautioned against assuming that modernization necessarily means convergence](#) with U.S. or Russian doctrine. China's force development may reflect concerns about the survivability of its deterrent – or the coercive value of its nuclear arsenal – in the face of increasingly capable conventional strike, missile defense, surveillance, cyber, and space systems.

That distinction matters. Intentions shape strategy, and analysts should resist reading every new capability through an American doctrinal lens. At the same time, capabilities change the environment in which intentions operate. A larger force, more launch options, improved early warning, and greater interaction between nuclear and non-nuclear systems create questions about alert status, command and control,

escalation, and decision timelines even if Beijing continues to describe its basic nuclear policy in familiar terms.

This is where the strategic stability problem becomes increasingly cross-domain. A conventional strike on a dual-capable missile unit, a cyber operation against command-and-control networks, an attack on space-based sensors, or the use of artificial intelligence to accelerate warning and decision processes could carry implications that the initiator does not fully anticipate. The central risk is not limited to deliberate nuclear escalation. It includes two governments assigning different meanings to the same action under severe time pressure and uncertain conditions.

Four Problems Worth Talking About

If the objective is to make strategic competition safer without assuming that political competition will diminish, four areas deserve sustained attention.

First, build a shared vocabulary for risk. Terms such as deterrence, strategic stability, escalation, crisis, and even transparency do not map cleanly across the two systems. This is more than a translation problem. Words carry assumptions about causation, responsibility, and acceptable behavior. A useful dialogue should expose those assumptions before attempting to negotiate around them. The U.S. and PRC militaries [took a small but relevant step in 2024](#) when they convened a Terms and Translations Working Group intended to improve mutual understanding of key defense and security terminology.

Second, recognize that technological change can drive a consideration of new options. The most useful questions are not demands for exhaustive disclosure. They concern how each side understands the operational consequences of modernization. What does no-first-use mean under different alert conditions? How does China think about warning, signaling, survivability, and command authority as its force becomes larger and more diverse? Which developments does Beijing see as strengthening deterrence, and which does it believe create pressure – or add incentives – to act earlier in a crisis? Even partial answers can help analysts and decision-makers identify where assumptions diverge most sharply.

Third, concentrate on the nuclear-conventional interface. This may be the most consequential area for risk reduction because it connects the capabilities most likely to be used in a conventional conflict with systems that support nuclear deterrence. Precision strike, cyber operations, counterspace capabilities, missile defense, and increasingly AI-enabled decision support can affect an adversary's perception of strategic vulnerability without crossing the nuclear threshold. Dialogue should therefore examine scenarios and pathways, not simply weapons categories. The relevant question is how an action by conventional forces for coercive purposes or to achieve operational advantage might be interpreted by the other side as having strategic consequences by posing a

threat to its nuclear deterrent.

Fourth, preserve consequential channels during political friction. The United States has a strong interest in keeping selected communications available when the broader relationship deteriorates. Recent experience demonstrates both the possibility and fragility of such mechanisms. Defense Policy Coordination Talks, the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, senior leader contacts, and theater commander communications [resumed after a November 2023 presidential meeting](#), following a period in which several channels had gone dormant or been suspended. The harder task is to develop a shared expectation that the channels most relevant to crisis and nuclear risk should remain usable precisely when political relations are under strain.

What Policymakers Should Expect from Engagement

A more disciplined approach begins by separating dialogue from détente. Communication does not require trust, political convergence, or reduced military competition. In a strategic rivalry, the value of dialogue may come precisely from the absence of those conditions.

It also requires a more modest definition of progress. A meeting that produces no joint statement may still clarify how Chinese officials describe a threshold, reveal which concepts generate resistance, or identify an assumption that would otherwise remain hidden until a crisis. Repetition matters. Strategic understanding often develops cumulatively as officials compare what counterparts say across time, institutions, and scenarios.

Track II and Track 1.5 dialogues can play a particularly useful role here. They can test vocabulary, explore scenarios that governments are not ready to address formally, and distinguish official positions from deeper strategic assumptions. Their value increases when they remain connected to real policy questions and when participants resist the temptation to treat access or agreement as the measure of success. A productive unofficial dialogue should help both sides understand where agreement is possible, where ambiguity can be reduced, and where differences are likely to persist.

Washington should also avoid making dialogue itself a concession. The United States can maintain a strong regional posture, support allies and partners, strengthen conventional and nuclear deterrence, and still pursue risk reduction with Beijing. These activities serve different purposes. Deterrence seeks to shape an adversary's choices. Dialogue seeks to improve the information environment in which those choices are made. A competitive strategy needs both.

Keeping Miscalculation Recoverable

The U.S.-China strategic relationship is entering a period in which older assumptions are less often applicable, and more often dangerous. China's nuclear force is expanding.

Conventional and nuclear systems can be more easily integrated, blurring the lines between them. Cyber, space, and artificial intelligence are creating new pathways through which actions in one domain can alter perceptions in another. At the same time, the political relationship remains competitive, and neither government is likely to accept the other's preferred definition of stability.

That is an argument for better calibrated engagement, not for abandoning it. The immediate objective should be practical: develop enough mutual understanding that leaders and military organizations can recognize dangerous signals, interpret ambiguous actions with greater discipline, and communicate before a crisis closes off their options.

The Cold War offers useful concepts, but it does not provide a template. Strategic stability with China will have to emerge from the particular structure of this competition, including asymmetries in forces, different approaches to transparency, contested regional interests, and the growing interaction of nuclear and non-nuclear technologies.

The standard for success should therefore be demanding but realistic. Dialogue will not resolve the central disputes between Washington and Beijing. It should help ensure that those disputes remain subject to human judgment and political control. In a relationship between nuclear powers, that is not a secondary objective. It is an essential part of deterrence itself.

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