

Procuring Trust in U.S.-China Strategic Relations

Resolving Differences over Nuclear Weapons and Confidence Building

Leif-Eric Easley, Harvard University Department of Government

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As China's role and influence on the world stage increases, so does the complexity and importance of its relationship with the standing post-Cold War superpower, the United States. Both Beijing and Washington are developing national strategies for dealing with the other as a global player. Today's climate is one of hedging as Sino-American cooperation is increasingly valuable and needed, but deep uncertainties remain between the two countries. Hedging, of course, means different things to different strategic planners. Nowhere are gaps in strategic concepts more worrisome than in the area of nuclear weapons deliverable over long distances. The Cold War might not have avoided nuclear winter had the United States and Soviet Union not had similar understandings of mutual assured destruction.

Shared security interests for stability inducing strategic force postures place both Beijing and Washington in favor of avoiding misperception, building confidence and increasing cooperation. Perhaps the greatest divergence between Washington and Beijing is the preferred order in which to pursue these aims. The U.S. side tends to focus on reducing specific misperceptions (via institutional commitments and greater transparency) to avoid conflict and increase cooperation. In contrast, the Chinese side focuses on strategic dialogue and increasing cooperation in the overall Sino-American relationship in order to build confidence. This paper addresses the tension between U.S. and Chinese visions and proceeds as follows. The first section briefly reviews current trends in Sino-American security relations. The second considers the two countries' nuclear postures and the sequencing problem in confidence building. The third section concludes with policy recommendations for moving beyond the sequencing problem and increasing trust in U.S.-China strategic relations.

Between Strategic Competitors and Partners

Three major trends have shaped Sino-American security relations in the post-Cold War period: China's rise, China's international socialization, and intermittent low-level crises. China's rise is based on impressive economic growth, notable not only for its speed and scale, but also for its correlation with increasing openness. Meanwhile, Beijing has engaged in a massive military modernization program with annual double-digit spending increases. Combine this expanding national comprehensive power with diplomatic

inroads including the return of Hong Kong and Macao under “one country, two systems” and the result is growing Chinese confidence and international political clout. China is a rising, but no longer revolutionary power: soaring economic interdependence has given it so much to gain from the current international order, and too much to lose by challenging it.

This particular rising power path has involved what some call China’s international socialization. China has rapidly integrated into the international trading system. It has increased institutional membership and multilateral involvement while adopting international norms and standards. China has developed a more sophisticated diplomacy and is now focused on winning the game instead of changing the rules. The U.S., hopeful of building what Beijing likes to refer to as a “win-win” relationship, has clearly opted for engagement rather than containment.

U.S.-PRC security relations have been prone to shocks, however. The 1999 U.S. bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 collision of a Chinese fighter jet with a U.S. reconnaissance plane were major flashpoints. Security relations also suffered shocks from changes in leadership and government reports, but then reached what was called “best ever” status after September 11, 2001. Security relations were not only affected by military issues such as non-proliferation (export controls on Chinese companies and pressuring North Korea and Iran), mil-mil transparency, and Taiwan, but also by economic issues such as the trade deficit, intellectual property rights, currency manipulation and energy competition. And of course, issues such as the rule of law, human rights and the environment provided challenges as well.

The result of post-Cold War trends and Sino-American interaction are increasingly complex relations with a new imperative to be constructive. Both sides realize the benefits of further cooperation, but with great uncertainty, mistrust remains. The new dynamic in U.S.-China relations is one of strategic restraint, dictated by mutual high cost perceptions of conflict, based on economic interests that demand the shared prize of stability. Strategic restraint between China and the U.S. has several key implications:

- Emphasize positive developments, downplay differences; focus on potential benefits of future cooperation;
- Modest coordination and exchange of favors such as U.S. support for China's international integration and China's hosting of the Six Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear programs;
- Avoiding obstruction: China generally not blocking U.S. global initiatives and UN Security Council resolutions, U.S. generally withholding sanctions and censure of China;
- Less discussion of threats, more summitry and working level dialogues.

Despite these new patterns in Sino-American security relations, there are strong signs of hedging via military modernization, contingency planning and alliance maintenance. Mixed signals abound as governments try to satisfy domestic political forces, and dangers run high of self-fulfilling prophecies (making the other an enemy by behaving as if it were) and unrealistic expectations followed by crises of disappointment. In sum, shared interests and interdependence have not yet led to a real U.S.-China strategic partnership. Deep cooperation requires more than mutually assured economic recession.

Nuclear Postures and Confidence Building

A balance of terror, while perhaps developing between the Chinese and U.S. economies, is not being sought by Washington or Beijing in terms of nuclear weapons. Some Chinese strategic planners may wish to capture more than one major U.S. city with second-strike capable nuclear missiles, and some U.S. strategic planners may wish to be able to capture all of China's strategic forces with a combination of nuclear and conventional first strikes and missile defenses. But a critical mass of strategic planners on both sides likely sees such strategic advantages as not worth the costs or potential consequences of pursuing.

Beijing's interest in maintaining a credible deterrent vis-à-vis superior U.S. nuclear forces only requires that Chinese strategic forces be able to capture one major U.S. city after surviving a first strike and evading missile defenses. This is a much lower bar than what Moscow has long maintained with Washington, but is in all likelihood sufficient to deter nuclear intimidation or strikes against China. Meanwhile, most U.S. strategic planners likely calculate that pursuing nuclear primacy vis-à-vis China would be destabilizing and, given no reasonable expectation for Beijing to disarm, have every interest in China being as responsible a nuclear power as possible.

These circumstances suggest that relations between the U.S. and China, as nuclear weapons states, should be quite stable. However, uncertainties remain about the current international security environment, the post-Cold War role of nuclear weapons and the future of U.S.-China relations. As a result, both Beijing and Washington are concerned about avoiding misperception, building confidence and increasing cooperation. A major problem appears to be that the two sides cannot agree on a vision for pursuing these aims. The U.S. side tends to emphasize institutional commitments and greater transparency to reduce misperceptions and avoid conflict. The Chinese side seems to prefer strategic dialogue and increasing cooperation in the overall Sino-American relationship in order to build confidence. These different approaches stymie progress and incite finger pointing.

It could be that each side is approaching the problem from a different end due to a combination of historical and cultural peculiarities. It could also be that both sides suffer from sequential or parochial thinking. More likely is that different approaches reflect

areas in which a country believes it has more to gain or areas it finds more politically comfortable. But given that neither the United States nor China have any interest or intention of attacking the other with nuclear weapons, confidence building regarding strategic forces should be positive rather than zero-sum. Concrete steps are needed to show that positions are genuine and governments are not using rhetoric for strategic deception. The arrows have to go both ways between the U.S. and China, and both ways between reducing misperceptions and increasing cooperation.

Toward Greater Trust and Cooperation

The simple solution for resolving competing visions for confidence building is to increase consultation. More complicated however, is credibly making clear U.S. and Chinese intentions and making positive adjustments in a process where cooperation is both a means and an end. Below are policy recommendations in five key areas.

Strategic Dialogue

- Engage in expert level dialogues, devoted not to gathering the highest ranks and titles possible together in a room, but having the right people at the table (counterparts from STRATCOM and the Second Artillery for example) with the ability to confer with their superiors in real-time for authorization to engage in exchanges with substance.
- Resolve any gap between declaratory policy and operational doctrine, for example: does China have operational purposes for nuclear weapons other than deterrence? Internal Chinese debates suggest possibility of use in a Taiwan contingency or in response to a non-nuclear strike on critical infrastructure.
- Counter misperceptions about official policy, for example: some Chinese misperceive that the U.S. has a preemptive nuclear strategy. U.S. officials could provide detailed explanations for why non-declaration of a no first use policy, i.e. calculated ambiguity, does not equate to a first use policy.

Greater transparency

- The United States could offer China unrestricted and unconditional access to early warning systems data including notifications of U.S. missile launches in an arrangement similar to the U.S.-Russian Joint Data Exchange Center (JDEC). If and when U.S. missiles are launched, this would ensure China they are not headed toward Beijing.
- China, rather than simply assert its military modernizations are for legitimate security concerns, could provide data to the U.S. about Chinese military improvements and why new capabilities are being developed. Such data sharing, including invitations of U.S. officials to hitherto unseen Chinese military facilities, could greatly reduce suspicion of Chinese military modernizations.

Crisis management and communication

- Both sides could formally commit to maintaining direct channels of communication (hotlines) for clear signaling in a crisis and exercising escalation control.

- The two sides could make an agreement ruling out use of nuclear weapons in a Taiwan scenario.

Safety of nuclear weapons

- Upgrade the software of nuclear weapons infrastructure against vulnerabilities to cyber warfare and malfunctions that could result in accidental launch or detonation.
- Increase physical security of nuclear material from attack, theft or purchase by terrorists.

Non-proliferation

- Strengthen and harmonize export control laws to prevent transfer of nuclear technology to states of concern or terrorist organizations.
- Provide clear, coordinated and strong disincentives for the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea and Iran.

These recommendations assume that China and the United States agree that nuclear weapons are for war prevention, not war fighting. Internal debates are to be expected as strategic planners in Washington and Beijing cope with the changing security environment. Despite current uncertainties, it is most likely China and the U.S. will share interests in decreasing the post-Cold War role of nuclear weapons and consolidating norms against nuclear weapons use and proliferation. This suggests that Washington redouble efforts for multilateral arms control, reduce its nuclear deployments and resist temptations of developing new types of nuclear weapons. This also means that China should seriously engage in arms control and disarmament mechanisms rather than maintain that its arsenal is too small for such discussions.

There is no one formula for building confidence in U.S.-China strategic relations. Reducing misperceptions and increasing cooperation are interactive rather than simple causes or effects; they are dynamic rather than sequential processes. Washington and Beijing can pursue strategic dialogue, greater transparency, crisis management and communication, nuclear safeguards and nonproliferation simultaneously. Such efforts can complement rather than contradict investments for maintaining safe, reliable and sufficient deterrent capabilities. Rather than procurement of new U.S. nuclear weapons or Chinese MIRV technology, the national interests of both sides, and international security at large, would be better served by procuring trust in U.S.-China strategic relations.