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What can China-US nuclear stability look like?



Zhou Bo is a retired senior colonel of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). He is a Senior fellow of the Center for International Security and Strategy Tsinghua University, and Distinguished Fellow of the Global Governance Institution (GGI).

What is the primary goal of the China-US nuclear relationship? Strategic stability. There are six nuclear-related issues that will matter for that stability in years to come.

1. China will not seek nuclear parity with the US, although China's nuclear arsenal will grow further. Beijing maintains that its nuclear arsenal is aimed at being "small and effective". The Pentagon estimates that China will possess 1500 nuclear warheads by 2035. Even if this turns out to be true, China's nuclear arsenal will still fall well short of parity with America's more than 5000 nuclear warheads.

The purpose of that expansion? To ensure that China has a reliable nuclear second-strike capability and that no country dare to contemplate a first strike on China in any circumstances. This ought to be seen as reassuring in a Washington which ought to worry that, if China has only a small number of nuclear weapons, it could be the first to use those weapons in a worst-case scenario.

2. China's no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons will continue to be honored. China, having maintained no-first-use for over six decades, has no wish to abandon it now, even if it is becoming ever-stronger. Although China has not ruled out the possibility of using non-peaceful means for eventual reunification with Taiwan, it has never mentioned the use of nuclear weapons against the people of Taiwan, whom Mainlanders refers to as "compatriots."

Beijing has called for all nuclear powers to adopt a no-first-use policy. That would allow them to occupy moral high ground without sacrificing a deterring capability to retaliate. The US has cited the concerns of allies as a reason for not making a no-first-use pledge. But who would venture to launch a nuclear strike on a U.S. ally, knowing it would invite massive nuclear retaliation? In January 2022, the five nuclear weapon states agreed in a joint statement that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." If indeed a nuclear war cannot be won, why not pledge no-first-use?

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3. It is a myth that China is not interested in bilateral or multilateral nuclear talks. The real question is what all parties can agree to talk about. During recent years, China has been reluctant to talk about the size and speed of its nuclear buildup, while the US has refused to talk about no-first-use. That ice can be broken by exploring other matters such as non-targeting of nuclear power plants, and they can exchange a list of nuclear facilities that they agree not to target with conventional weapons, as India and Pakistan are doing. Also, given that China's nuclear arsenal is expanding, perhaps they can finally talk about mutually-assured vulnerability, something that the US has so far refused to recognize.
4. China and the US could agree not to conduct anti-satellite attacks (ASAT). Both of them, along with Russia and India, have demonstrated anti-satellite capabilities through weapon tests. China and the US combined have tens of thousands of satellites sharing congested low earth orbits (LEO) and more are coming. This means neither side can destroy all the satellites of the other side. But the debris from even a few destroyed satellites could pose risks to their own satellites. Therefore, they could jointly propose a mutual moratorium on destructive tests. Similarly, timely notification procedures should be set up for high-risk scenarios, such as satellite close approaches, debris collision risks, and in-orbit testing of directed energy devices.

Yet none of this is possible if the US continues with the Golden Dome system which requires placing weapon systems in orbit. President Trump believes "we must have American dominance in space. And so we will". This is a hallucination. No defense system is 100% effective. A war in space would be a prelude to or part of an all-out nuclear war in which there cannot be any winners.

5. China and the US should work towards institutionalizing mutual notification of specified missile launches. Because there is already agreement between Russia and the US on mutual notification and between China and Russia on missile launch notifications, an agreement on mutual notification between China and the US can lead to a trilateral notification agreement.

In September and November, 2024, Beijing and Washington notified each other of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests. This was a rare yet good example of confidence-building. Alas, it was followed by a bad example: in August 2026, the US led a group of 41 countries in criticizing China (without naming it) for not providing 24 hours' advance notice of a sea-launched ICBM test into the South Pacific. They complained that the test was not in line with the Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCOC). This was nonsensical because China is not a party to the HCOC and China did give advance notice to relevant countries, including the US.

6. Since China and the US dominate AI development, they should take the lead in talking about the application of AI in the military field. In 2024, President Xi and President Biden agreed to have human oversight over nuclear command & control systems. But to date there have been no follow-up discussions on this specific issue. Perhaps a non-governmental experts' dialogue could help to achieve agreement on the following: a ban on fully autonomous AI nuclear strike

algorithms, restricting AI to advisory threat assessments, and setting shared standards against malicious cyber disruption of rival nuclear command, control and communications (NC3) infrastructures.

China and the US can also take the lead on pre-notification of strategic missile launches, immediate hotline communication on AI-triggered nuclear false alarms, and exchanges on military AI boundaries in nuclear domains. Eventually, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council could make a joint statement on AI nuclear governance and could integrate human nuclear control clauses into the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons review process, elevating bilateral agreement into multilateral law.

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Tracey Stewart
Partnership Secretary
tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com
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