

The Risk of Nuclear War with China: A Troubling Lack of Urgency

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Summary

Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, the governments of the United States and the People's Republic of China are a few poor decisions away from starting a war that could escalate rapidly and end in a nuclear exchange. Mismatched perceptions increase both the possibility of war and the likelihood it will result in the use of nuclear weapons. Miscommunication or misunderstanding could spark a conflict that both governments may find difficult to stop. War between the United States and the People's Republic of China is not inevitable, but failing to acknowledge the risks is certain to make it more likely.

Introduction

The possibility that the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (PRC) could become involved in a nuclear war is increasing. Both governments must acknowledge the danger if they hope to avoid it.

Several factors contribute to the risk of a nuclear war between the United States and the People's Republic of China:

- The United States and China have a contentious history. Mutual mistrust sustains an entrenched and deepening antagonism despite sincere and occasionally successful efforts to cooperate on shared concerns such as climate change and nuclear terrorism.
- Both governments are preparing for war, including improving their nuclear arsenals. U.S. and PRC decision makers believe they need a demonstrable readiness to use military force—including nuclear weapons—to ensure the other nation will yield in a military confrontation.

- U.S. and PRC leaders try to avoid conflict, but their discussions of contentious issues are inadequate. The extensive military exchanges the governments have conducted have produced memoranda of understanding on the conduct of naval vessels and aircraft, but strategic dialogues on their nuclear forces, missile defenses, and anti-satellite weapons are perfunctory.
- U.S. and PRC officials see the risk differently. U.S. officials are concerned that if a military conflict starts, they may need to use nuclear weapons to stop it. PRC officials assume that no nation would ever invite nuclear retaliation by using nuclear weapons first. Their concern is to assure the PRC maintains a credible ability to retaliate after a U.S. nuclear attack.

Can this peace that is not peace be maintained indefinitely? Diplomacy has not slowed steadily accelerating preparations for war, nor has it resolved U.S.-PRC disputes over the status of Taiwan, North Korean threats, or the freedom of military navigation in East Asian waters. Keeping the peace depends on the skill and patience of political leaders who seek to avoid conflict even as they keep a nervous eye on the balance of rapidly evolving military technologies they are not trained to assess. Former U.S. secretary of defense Robert McNamara closed a lifetime of watching that balance by warning, "The indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will destroy nations" (Morris 2003). It is a warning the leaders of the United States and the People's Republic of China should take to heart.

Enemies from the Start

Economic and political elites in the United States want their Chinese counterparts to abandon com-

unist ideology and one-party rule. Some believe that Chinese communism is an inherently evil and aggressive form of government that threatens the United States, its allies, and international order.

Determining what Chinese elites want is difficult because of constraints on speech and foreign contact. Foreign academics like Hugh White of the Australian National University and John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago believe Chinese leaders seek to “change the regional order” (White 2016) and “dominate Asia” (Mearsheimer 2014). Chinese Communist Party (CCP) complaints against the United States are more specific. The CCP objects to U.S. military protection of the government of the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan, the maintenance of what it sees as inherently hostile U.S. military alliances with neighboring governments, and persistent U.S. diplomatic efforts to isolate the PRC (CAMS 2013). CCP leaders interpret U.S. criticisms of their domestic and foreign policies as part of longstanding U.S. efforts to undo the Chinese communist revolution and upend CCP rule.

Establishing the trust needed to have confidence in diplomatic resolutions . . . is difficult when both governments take every new effort to up the technological ante as an act of bad faith.

The historical record is sympathetic to CCP complaints. The U.S. government supported the ROC government in its fight against the communist-led political opposition that eventually seized control of most of China in 1949. After the ROC leaders and many of their supporters fled to Taiwan to avoid being deposed, the United States used the threat of military force—including repeated threats to use nuclear weapons—to prevent the CCP from dislodging the Republic of China from its island sanctuary. The United States refused to recognize the new PRC government and convinced many of its allies to continue supporting the ROC’s claim to be the sole legitimate government of China even though it only

had de facto jurisdiction over Taiwan. With U.S. and allied support, the ROC kept China’s seat at the United Nations until 1971, when the People’s Republic of China finally put together the two-thirds majority in the UN General Assembly needed to switch UN recognition.

For most of this period, the CCP described the United States as an imperialist giant with clay feet, destined to be overthrown in a global communist revolution. The CCP provided assistance to communist political parties in other developing nations, and its aid to communist movements in North Korea and Vietnam made it a party to military conflicts with the United States. Large-scale PRC military intervention in North Korea preserved a communist party on the verge of defeat after attempting to unify the peninsula by force, an effort defeated by U.S. military aid to their rivals in the south. Small-scale PRC military assistance played a consequential role in the civil war in Vietnam, aiding the Communist Party of Vietnam’s successful effort to defeat the United States and unify the country under its rule.

In 1979, 30 years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the United States finally established normal diplomatic relations with it. Over the next 10 years, the U.S. government gradually reduced some restrictions on economic, cultural, and military contact with the PRC, while many remained in place despite normalization. PRC domestic reforms liberalizing economic and social life encouraged U.S. economic and political elites, but hopes for political reform dissolved in June 1989 after the CCP used lethal military force to suppress nationwide public demonstrations. Congress imposed new restrictions on interactions with the PRC. Still in place today are many of these “Tiananmen” sanctions, named after the square in Beijing where many demonstrators were killed.

The CCP defended its decision to use lethal military force against its own citizens by claiming the U.S. government was using the demonstrations to undermine communist leadership. Afterwards, the CCP launched a continuing series of “patriotic education” campaigns warning Chinese youth of foreign efforts to encourage the “bourgeois liberalization” of Chinese culture and the “peaceful evolution” of Chi-

nese politics away from communism. Even as accelerating economic and social liberalization has created new opportunities for nongovernmental Chinese organizations, the CCP has restricted their activities severely. It believes the United States would use such organizations to interfere in PRC domestic politics. Similarly, the rapid growth of the Internet has given Chinese citizens a measure of free speech and association, which the CCP has restricted for the same reason. It has forbidden using the Internet for political purposes, censored content providers, excluded Facebook and other foreign platforms, and encouraged the development of Chinese alternatives that uphold CCP restrictions while satisfying the nonpolitical expectations of most Chinese users.

In the 1990s and into the 21st century, economic and social liberalization continued and the economy grew rapidly despite these constraints. U.S. businesses invested heavily in Chinese development, facilitated by U.S. government efforts to expand trade relations, but a large, bipartisan minority in Congress objected. Some argued trade empowered a communist leadership that denied the Chinese people basic human rights. Others saw the PRC's growing economic capability as enabling an expansionist military. Constant U.S. debates about engaging or containing the PRC gave rise to persistent congressional efforts to monitor the relationship, report on worrisome developments, and recommend restrictions to hedge against potential PRC threats to the United States and its allies.

As PRC economic growth slowed in recent years, CCP leaders shifted the focus of economic policy from international integration to domestic reorganization. Income inequality, urban-to-rural migration, environmental degradation, systemic corruption, and other domestic problems associated with three decades of rapid economic growth now commanded the lion's share of CCP attention. Thirty years of rapid growth also afforded the PRC greater autonomy and authority in the international economy.

The global financial crisis of 2009 accelerated the implementation of new CCP economic policies championing domestic firms and eliminating prefer-

ential treatment for foreign ones. U.S. business interests became less enthusiastic about their long-term prospects and more sanguine about U.S.-China trade relations. This shift in economic relations tipped the balance of U.S. domestic debates away from engaging and toward containing the PRC.

Preparations for War

Throughout the past three decades the People's Republic of China kept military spending at a more or less constant 2 percent of GDP, where it remains today (SIPRI 2016). However, rapid economic growth afforded a correspondingly rapid growth in military spending. The U.S. government characterizes that buildup as indicative of aggressive intentions. The CCP describes it as a restrained effort to defend sovereign interests and keep up with rapid advances in U.S. military technology.

PRC leaders want to be able to prosecute a conventional war without worrying it will escalate to the nuclear level . . . to fight a conventional war under conditions of nuclear deterrence.

A consensus has emerged among the Pentagon, Congress, and the White House on the need to maintain U.S. advantages. Recently, the RAND Corporation concluded that PRC military modernization was eroding U.S. military dominance in Asia (Heigenbotham 2015). The Department of Defense warned that continued PRC modernization could reduce U.S. technological advantages (OSD 2016). And a congressional commission concluded that the goal of PRC military modernization was to restrict U.S. military operations in the Western Pacific (U.S.CC 2015).

The Obama administration decided to counter those perceived threats by investing in new submarines, a new stealth bomber, improved missile defenses, and anti-satellite weapons (OSD 2012). In

2016, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced that these new U.S. investments in advanced weaponry were designed to check PRC military improvements (Carter 2016).

Currently, the United States plans to invest more than a trillion dollars in comprehensive upgrades to its nuclear forces (Wolfsthal 2014). It also plans to spend several hundred billion dollars modernizing the U.S. nuclear weapons complex—the laboratories and facilities that research, design, produce, and maintain nuclear weapons (UCS 2014). These plans include developing two nuclear weapons intended for fighting a nuclear war against the PRC: the Long-Range Stand-Off (LRSO) nuclear-armed cruise missile (Kristensen 2015) and a redesigned B61 nuclear gravity bomb (HASC 2011). Advocates argue that these “tailored nuclear components” of the U.S. arsenal are indispensable to a “theory of victory” over China once a conflict starts (Roberts 2016).

The United States wants to be able to threaten to escalate to the nuclear level in order to prohibit the outbreak of a conventional war or, if that fails, to determine the outcome.

Researchers at the Chinese Academy of Military Science, a research center under the Central Military Commission, which is the highest PRC military authority, believe the United States seeks an “absolute military superiority” that it can use to limit China’s development and compromise its autonomy (CAMS 2013). A PRC Ministry of Defense white paper identified three new U.S. threats to PRC national security: “hegemonism, power politics, and neo interventionism.” It announced the PRC would counter those threats with continued investments in military space capabilities, missile defenses, strategic early warning systems, and long-range precision strike weapons (SCIO 2015).

The People’s Republic of China does not release information about the size, composition, or cost of

its nuclear forces. U.S. estimates describe a relatively small nuclear arsenal: several hundred warheads and 75-100 long-range ballistic missiles that can reach the United States (OSD 2016). The PRC also has a few score intermediate range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles that can be armed with nuclear warheads (NASIC 2013). PRC military publications have discussed plans to improve the quality and increase the quantity of nuclear-armed delivery vehicles, but they have characterized these improvements as limited measures intended to hedge against continuing U.S. investments in a global missile defense network and the U.S. development of long-range precision strike capabilities. PRC leaders are not planning a major build-up in numbers, which they believe would be counterproductive (CAMS 2013).

According to experts within China, the PRC eschews fighting a nuclear war and has no plans to produce nuclear weapons for that purpose (Sun 2013). The PRC may attempt to use its nuclear forces to send a signal to the United States if it launches large-scale conventional military attacks against sensitive targets like the Three Gorges Dam, major population centers, or nuclear power plants (Yu 2004). The PRC is also considering raising the alert level of its nuclear forces so it can launch them on warning of an incoming attack (CAMS 2013).

U.S. and PRC interactions in East Asian waters increasingly emphasize the use of military force. In 2009, the Obama administration broke with past policy by indicating it would use military force to police long-simmering disputes between China and its Asian neighbors over competing sovereignty claims (Chang 2010). The change responded to PRC statements describing its sovereignty claims as a “core interest” (DOS 2010). The United States backed up its new policy with new military bases, deployments, and exercises in the region. It sailed U.S. Navy task forces into PRC-claimed waters that the United States does not normally patrol. The stated objective has been to compel a compromise of PRC sovereignty claims (OSD 2012). The PRC responded by accelerating ongoing island-building activities, excluding foreign fishing vessels from disputed waters, and constructing new military facilities in the region.

China and the United States are also ramping up plans to use military force in outer space. In 2007, the PRC tested a destructive anti-satellite (ASAT) interceptor against one of its own satellites. Subsequent PRC research, development, and testing of ASAT weapons, particularly a high-altitude ASAT test in May 2013, caused the Obama administration to shift away from diplomacy and toward military countermeasures to address the Chinese threat to U.S. satellites (Hitchens 2016).

These demonstrations of the capability and the will to use military force on the high seas and in outer space mirror attempts by both governments to develop the capability for cyber attacks. The PRC military has hacked U.S. government and corporate websites and stolen the personnel files of millions of security clearance holders (Nakashima 2015). U.S. intelligence agencies collaborated with U.S. telecommunication firms that provided the equipment used in China's computer networks. The PRC is replacing the equipment with domestically designed and manufactured replacements and now prohibits U.S. firms from selling to large sections of the Chinese IT market (Griffiths 2015).

In this way, both governments are implementing policies that prioritize hedging against threats over the benefits of scientific, technological, and commercial collaboration. The time, effort, and resources they devote to preparing for a potential war far outweigh their support for confidence building and cooperation. In some areas, like space science and technology, hedging now makes bilateral cooperation extremely difficult.

Avoiding Conflict

Both heads of state make an effort to speak constructively about U.S.–China relations. On the eve of his 2015 visit to the United States, President Xi Jinping told *The Wall Street Journal*, “Both history and reality show that China and the United States stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation” (WSJ 2015). Three days later, President Obama thanked Xi for his “commitment to cooperation” on shared concerns, such as the Ebola outbreak, nuclear

nonproliferation, and climate change (White House 2015).

The two leaders also acknowledged areas of disagreement, such as freedom of military navigation in East Asian waters, the severity of UN sanctions on North Korea, and CCP domestic policies toward Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. President Xi stressed that as long as these disagreements cannot be resolved, both sides should at least refrain from words and deeds that exacerbate differences and elevate tensions (WSJ 2015). However, President Obama has taken a more assertive approach. He told *The Atlantic* he hopes to compel the PRC to relent on areas of disagreement by “drawing other Asian nations into the U.S. orbit” and “mobilizing most of Asia to isolate China” (Goldberg 2016).

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The two militaries have agreed to regular exchanges intended to keep political disagreements and diplomatic maneuvering from escalating into armed conflict. These exchanges include meetings between senior defense officials, academic conferences, and ship visits. The U.S. Department of Defense claims the exchanges have “sustained positive momentum and achieved notable accomplishments,” especially two memoranda of understanding on confidence-building measures to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and accidents (OSD 2016). General Fang Fenghui, the chief of the Joint Staff Department under the Central Military Commission, told former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that the Chinese military was fully committed to implementing these memoranda, as well as to building a “healthy and stable military-to-military relationship that was beneficial to increasing strategic trust between the PRC and the United States” (MOD 2016).

Attempts to talk at the strategic level have been less productive. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton introduced strategic issues into existing high-level economic dialogues during her first trip to China in 2009. She hoped to find “complimentary approaches” to vexing security problems (Clinton and Geithner 2009). She didn’t. The participants avoided contentious issues as the dialogues progressed. For example, the only concrete step forward on outer space was a preliminary discussion on civil space cooperation, and it was limited to basic information sharing (DOS 2015). Previous dialogue agendas covered important but non-confrontational issues, such as women’s rights, people-to-people exchanges, wildlife trafficking, ocean conservation, and partnerships around environmental matters (DOS 2016). The eighth and final dialogue of Obama’s tenure may have some strategic issues on the agenda, but preparatory talks indicate the discussions will focus on safety rather than security (Xinhua 2016)

Currently, the United States plans to invest more than a trillion dollars in comprehensive upgrades to its nuclear forces and in modernizing the U.S. nuclear weapons complex.

Unofficial dialogues on strategic issues confront contentious security problems more directly. Chinese and U.S. academics, nongovernmental analysts, and mid-level government personnel meet regularly in a variety of forums to discuss both the disputes that could lead to a military conflict and how such a conflict might be fought. One critical set of bilateral dialogues organized with the support of nongovernmental organizations like the Center for Non-Proliferations Studies and the CSIS Pacific Forum focuses on preserving strategic stability—a euphemism for making sure that if a conflict starts it does not end in a nuclear exchange.

The PRC solution to avoiding a nuclear exchange begins with a commitment to no first use of nuclear weapons. PRC participants in the dialogues

claim their policies around procuring, deploying, alerting, and using nuclear weapons are consistent with that commitment (Roberts 2016). Official U.S. assessments affirm that the PRC maintains a small nuclear force, kept off alert and to be used for retaliation from a nuclear attack (OSD 2016), but they remain skeptical that China would not use nuclear weapons first in some situations. PRC participants in the talks argue that a comparable no-first-use commitment from the United States would be the best way to ensure that a conventional military conflict between the two nations does not escalate to the nuclear level.

The Obama administration considered this option but concluded there is “a narrow range of contingencies” where the United States may need to resort to the first use of nuclear weapons to counter conventional attacks against the United States, its allies, or non-allied “partners” (DOD 2010). Statements by a former Pentagon official who participated in these deliberations indicated that one of those contingencies is a conventional attack by the PRC on U.S. military bases in Asia (Roberts 2016).

Because the Obama administration considered and rejected the possibility of committing the United States to a no-first-use policy, most of the U.S. participants in the dialogues view continued PRC requests for this commitment as an obstacle to progress. PRC participants have responded by suggesting an alternative: an assurance from the United States that it would not seek to negate China’s ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons if struck first.

Some U.S. officials, such as former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and former Secretary of Defense William Perry, appear willing to grant the PRC this assurance; in their view, it is “not a policy choice to be embraced or rejected, but rather a strategic fact to be managed with priority on strategic stability” (CFR 2009). However, some experts express concern that, while true, acknowledging this fact could undermine extended deterrence guarantees the United States has made to China’s neighbors. Other U.S. officials worry that the PRC’s communist leaders would interpret acquiescence on this point as a sign of appeasement, increasing the

probability of PRC military aggression (Roberts 2016).

Uncommon Problems

Given that the United States plans to use nuclear weapons in a war with China under certain contingencies, U.S. decision makers worry that a conventional conflict could escalate to the level where they must face those contingencies. PRC planners assume that no government would ever invite nuclear retaliation by using nuclear weapons first, and they worry that their U.S. counterparts might believe they can avoid or prevent retaliation. As a result, the strategic problem for U.S. decision makers is how to control the escalation of a conventional conflict, while the strategic problem for PRC decision makers is how to convince the United States that China can and will retaliate if the United States initiates a nuclear attack.

The steps the PRC is taking to solve its strategic problem make it more difficult for U.S. military planners to solve theirs. The United States wants to be able to threaten to escalate to the nuclear level in order to prohibit the outbreak of a conventional war or, if that fails, to determine the outcome. The PRC wants to take nuclear weapons off the table, and it believes it can do so as long as it maintains a credible ability to retaliate to a U.S. nuclear attack. Its greatest apprehension is that the United States can use new conventional capabilities to degrade PRC nuclear retaliatory forces to the point where U.S. military planners feel they can risk threatening a nuclear attack to stop a conventional war. Liberation from this kind of nuclear blackmail is why the CCP decided to develop nuclear weapons in the first place (Sun 2013).

Put differently, PRC leaders want to be able to prosecute a conventional war without worrying it will escalate to the nuclear level. PRC military authors refer to this as the ability to fight and win a conventional war under conditions of nuclear deterrence (CAMS 2013). The United States wants China's leaders to believe that nuclear escalation is a possibility in order to restrain the PRC, while at the

same time minimizing the possibility that U.S. leaders will be forced to confront the prospect of actually using nuclear weapons. The result is a psychological contest that is driving an unusual arms race between U.S. conventional capabilities that threaten PRC nuclear forces and a mix of new PRC nuclear and conventional capabilities designed to mitigate those threats.

The PRC is most concerned about U.S. missile defenses, U.S. conventional precision-strike weapons, and U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities (CAMS 2013). Improved ISR could enable the United States to find, track, target, and confirm the destruction of PRC nuclear forces. Conventional precision-strike weapons could enable the United States to destroy those forces without resorting to a nuclear first strike. Missile defenses could be insurance that enables the United States to intercept those PRC nuclear weapons it fails to discover or destroy.

The PRC is countering U.S. missile defenses by increasing the number of warheads it can deliver to the United States, as well as diversifying the basing modes of the missiles that deliver them.

China can counter ISR by disabling or destroying the satellites the United States uses to help find, track, target, and confirm the destruction of military targets. As noted, the PRC used a direct-assent, hit-to-kill interceptor to destroy one of its own weather satellites in 2007 (Kulacki and Lewis 2009). Anti-satellite weapons might also be useful in degrading the accuracy of conventional strike weapons. U.S. government reports indicate that a PRC ASAT test in May 2013 demonstrated an ability to attack U.S. GPS satellites (Weeden 2014).

The PRC is countering U.S. missile defenses by increasing the number of warheads it can deliver to the United States, as well as by improving the quality and diversifying the basing modes of the missiles

that deliver them (OSD 2016). It is also developing countermeasures, including maneuverable reentry vehicles and decoys, to prevent those warheads from being intercepted (OSD 2016). In addition, the PRC intends to develop and build a strategic early warning system that will give it more time to protect its nuclear forces or, if protection is not possible, to launch missiles on warning of an incoming attack (CAMS 2013).

The technical requirements for these PRC solutions to its strategic problem—preserving the ability to retaliate from a nuclear attack—are far less imposing than the requirements facing U.S. military planners who seek to prevent a conflict from starting or escalating. That may be why the United States is considering developing new nuclear weapons designed to credibly threaten a first use. U.S. proponents think they might be able to intimidate their PRC counterparts into believing that a “tailored” U.S. use of a supposedly “small” nuclear weapon is not worth the cost of PRC nuclear retaliation against U.S. cities (Roberts 2015).

Keeping the peace depends on the skill and patience of political leaders who seek to avoid conflict as they keep a nervous eye on the balance of rapidly evolving military technologies.

It is not difficult to imagine situations that could trigger an inadvertent or accidental nuclear war. For example, PRC leaders could underestimate U.S. willingness to use nuclear weapons to stop a conventional war. U.S. leaders could underestimate PRC willingness to retaliate after a tailored U.S. nuclear attack. The PRC could launch a retaliatory nuclear attack if the United States were to launch conventional missile strikes that China mistakenly believed were nuclear. The United States could make the same mistake. Equipment in the command and control network of either nation could be destroyed or malfunction, especially given the interest of both countries in anti-satellite weapons. Decision makers

may not have timely access to accurate information in the fog of a conflict.

A PRC decision to move to launch on warning would be especially dangerous. The U.S. and Soviet/Russian experience with warning systems shows that false alarms and unexpected situations occur due to human and technical errors, and they are especially likely early in the deployment and operation of such a system. Errors of this sort increased the risk of a nuclear exchange on multiple occasions for the United States and Russia both during and after the Cold War.

No Technical Exit

As long as both sides remain committed to pursuing technical solutions to their unique strategic problems, they are condemned to continue competing indefinitely. But stalemate is not a stable outcome; rather, it is a perpetual high-wire act. Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, the governments of the United States and China are a few poor decisions away from starting a war that could escalate rapidly and end in a nuclear exchange.

Lack of mutual trust and a growing sense that their differences may be irreconcilable incline both governments to continue looking for military solutions—for new means of coercion that help them feel more secure. Establishing the trust needed to have confidence in diplomatic resolutions to the disagreements, animosities, and suspicions that have troubled leaders of the United States and the PRC for almost 70 years is extremely difficult when both governments take every new effort to up the technological ante as an act of bad faith.

The bilateral dialogues on strategic stability aim to manage the military competition, but they do not seek to end it. Although the two governments work very hard at avoiding conflict, they have yet to find a way out of what Graham Allison called their “Thucydides trap”—the risk of conflict between a rising power and an established power invested in the status quo (Allison 2015). Allison’s warning not to minimize the risks of war is sage advice, even if he does not say how the United States and China can escape the trap he describes.

PRC leaders believe it is possible to prosecute a major war without risking a U.S. nuclear attack. The leaders of the United States believe stopping the PRC from prosecuting such a war may depend, in certain contingencies, on a credible threat to use nuclear weapons—a threat U.S. leaders state they are prepared to execute. These mismatched perceptions increase both the possibility of war and the likelihood it will result in the use of nuclear weapons.

Well-informed U.S. officials tend to dismiss the possibility that the United States and the PRC could wander into a nuclear war. For example, Admiral Dennis Blair, a former Director of National Intelligence whose final military post was Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, assured a large gathering of U.S. arms-control experts that “the chances of a nuclear exchange between the United States and China are somewhere between nil and zero.” J. Stapleton Roy, a former U.S. ambassador to the PRC, wholeheartedly agreed (Swaine, Blair, and Roy 2015). Similarly, PRC military strategists and arms control experts believe that the risk of nuclear war with the United States is not an urgent concern even if that risk may not be zero (Cunningham and Fravel 2015).

This lack of urgency is troubling. For example, the United States reportedly told the PRC it would

risk military escalation to prevent or stop a proposed PRC island reclamation project in the Scarborough Shoal (Cooper and Douglas 2016). The PRC reportedly responded by committing to move ahead with the project later in 2016 (Chan 2016). This particular contest of wills is part of a steadily increasing number of unresolved diplomatic spats that have escalated to the level of overt military posturing reminiscent of U.S.-Soviet jousting during the Cold War.

The United States and the PRC are decades-old enemies, preparing for war and armed with nuclear weapons. Good faith efforts by the leaders of both nations have failed to stop accelerating preparations for war, including new investments in their nuclear forces. Miscommunication, misunderstanding, or poor judgment could spark a conflict that both governments may find difficult to stop.

War between the United States and the People’s Republic of China is not inevitable, but failing to acknowledge the risks is certain to make it more likely. Both governments should confront these risks with a greater sense of purpose. Only then will they devote the same measure of creativity, effort, and resources to the diplomacy of reducing those risks as they now spend preparing for war.

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