

The Indo-Pacific Stability-Instability Paradox

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ABSTRACT

The nuclear revolution grounded the geopolitical competition of the Cold War. Likewise, there are risks and opportunities present in U.S.-China relations owing to their mutual possession of survivable nuclear arsenals. As geopolitical competition evolves between the two powers, the role each arsenal plays will be fundamental to their grand strategies in the Indo-Pacific. Chinese revisionism presents the United States with a threat to its preferred global order, while China seeks its own preferences in its neighborhood over those of U.S. allies. Exactly how mutual vulnerability to each other's nuclear arsenals affects the initiation of or entrance to a regional conflict requires understanding the radically different perspectives each power holds of nuclear weapons in military strategy. Fortunately, the Cold War rivalry offers helpful contrasts and similarities to the current arrangement. Specifically, Glenn Snyder's classic "stability-instability paradox" holds insight for analyzing strategic stability in the region, pertaining to the likelihood and management of non-nuclear limited war. This paper holistically considers the nuclear strategies of China and the United States, their geopolitical interests, and threats to strategic stability in order to determine the relationship between the United States' commitment to strategic stability and a nuclear policy that can safeguard its geopolitical interests. This paper concludes with recommendations that the United States should both avoid a no-first-use pledge and formally acknowledge mutual vulnerability with China. These are designed to exploit the United States' advantages in nuclear weapons to secure both peace and its allies' sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of greater Chinese national strength, complementary military capabilities, and uncertainty over its intentions towards standing international order merit careful American policy, not least in nuclear doctrine and posture

towards the Indo-Pacific region. U.S. thinking about a regional nuclear posture has balanced between how to successfully address the rogue state of North Korea, shoring up strategic stability in case greater Chinese assertiveness imperils it and also maintaining and strengthening its alliances in the region to prevent Chinese revisionism. Existing analysis establishes Chinese and U.S. views about their respective arsenals and strategies, including comparisons between U.S.-China relations and older U.S. attitudes about Soviet nuclear strategy. Absent among much of the literature is a complementary analysis of Chinese conventional military capabilities and doctrine and the continued relevance of geopolitical competition.

A refined acknowledgment of Cold War-era thinking about nuclear balance should complement this. This includes the stability-instability paradox concept of the Cold War, which refers to a situation where nuclear powers vulnerable to the other's arsenal might find themselves at war due to the canceled out deterrence, often dismissed as inapplicable between the United States and China. This paper argues that a cross-domain assessment of the two states' nuclear postures reveals that U.S. policymakers should maintain long-standing U.S. approaches to nuclear strategy to reassure allies and discourage Chinese revisionism. Considering Chinese and U.S. objectives and thinking, the strategic stability concerns of both, and the U.S. need to fulfill grand strategic imperatives in the region are used to reach these answers.

CHINESE STRATEGIC THOUGHT AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Chinese strategic thought concerning nuclear weapons and China's strategic ends in its near abroad both create prospects for crisis instability for the United States and thus necessitate a U.S. nuclear strategy that can safeguard its geostrategic interests. For its part, Chinese thinking about nuclear weapons bears several unique qualities. Unlike China, the United States crafted a role for nuclear weapons in a gradual fashion, first merely to deter conventional aggression and later into a complex logic once nuclear parity with the Soviet Union dawned. China's experience coalesced around facing down superior nuclear capabilities of both great powers. After decades of discomfort for the term given the history of nuclear threats against China, the taboo on the term of deterrence (*wēishè* in Chinese, a word also meaning 'intimidation') ceased after academic debate through the 1980s and -90s.¹ Representing predominant Chinese views, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) textbooks combine traditional U.S. distinctions between deterrence and compellence into the term *wēishè*.² Usefully, the Chinese idea is comparable to Thomas Schelling's concept of 'coercion', which has been noted by some Chinese scholars.³

Additionally, so much resistance was expressed about the role of nuclear weapons. Mao Zedong referred to them merely as "paper tigers," intimidating

but useless for war-fighting. Of course, this did not mean that Chinese possession of nuclear weapons could not neutralize another power's intimidation. This background continues to bear great relevance in Chinese thinking.⁴ China evaluates its security as rooted in stable and calm international relationships and measured domestic priorities. Coupled with underlying modes of strategic thinking, this results in several formulations of Chinese nuclear strategy.

CHINA'S NO-FIRST-USE POLICY

A defining characteristic of Chinese nuclear doctrine is its no-first-use (NFU) policy. Such a policy predicates any use of Chinese nuclear weapons to respond to an adversary's nuclear attack. Necessarily, this would mean that Chinese nuclear use is explicitly and solely a deterrent to any nuclear attack. Such an offensive would incite a Chinese counterattack, rendering any gains from the nuclear use inadequate to justify their original use. The NFU policy also necessarily means that China will not use its arsenal coercively.⁵ Despite doubts about the doctrine from outside observers, the wealth of evidence that Chinese strategists consider the principle implicit in all strategic planning should frame U.S. nuclear strategy.

RETLIATORY AND MINIMALIST ASPECTS OF CHINESE NUCLEAR STRATEGY

The history of Chinese nuclear developments tracks its doctrine of maintaining an arsenal no broader than necessary to assure a retaliatory strike against an adversary and large enough to prevent the hamstringing of Chinese policy. China's nuclear strategy's precise terminology varies, with numerous different Chinese translations further complicating things. However, the most common overarching term for Chinese nuclear strategy is minimal deterrence. The goal is to have the means to retaliate against an attack, irrespective of exact, comparative arsenal sizes, thus freeing China from 'coercion,' meaning any attempt to unduly influence its behavior. Often described as pursuing a basis of "assured retaliation," the strategy can also be thought of as a holistic assessment of its adversaries' nuclear and conventional capabilities and a corresponding nuclear arsenal that can sufficiently surmount potential enemy capabilities.⁶ A secure second-strike capability (SSC) is generally regarded as sufficient to deter even limited nuclear war.⁷ Specific to China, there is little evidence that leadership cares about numerical parity.⁸

The relationship between U.S. and Chinese intentions behind their nuclear strategies is often unclear. Usefully, discussions between Chinese and U.S. officials have created a common, if incomplete, vocabulary. This glossary defines minimum deterrence as "threatening the lowest level of damage

necessary to prevent an attack, with the fewest number of nuclear weapons possible."⁹ Chinese officials embrace this conception of their arsenal, alongside the traditional Chinese description of it as *jīnggànyú yóuxiào*, usually translated as "lean and effective." The arsenal must be survivable, meaning it needs to withstand a nuclear assault and still be capable of response. As the force stands, there are an estimated 290 Chinese warheads due to extensive and deliberate modernization efforts. Approximately 150 of these are capable of reaching the continental United States.¹⁰ The principles responsible for calibrating the arsenal have remained consistent as the force structure has shifted.

CHINESE THOUGHT REGARDING ESCALATION IN THE NUCLEAR DOMAIN

Escalation dynamics ground nearly all nuclear strategies. However, the Chinese perspective lacks a concurrent one-to-one match with U.S. military thinking. For Chinese strategists, "war control" is the usual term used to refer to the use of national instruments of power to shape how conducive the external environment is to possible conflict and how well-positioned China can be if such an eventuality occurs. War control is a far more expansive concept than de-escalation. It is not specific to minimizing but could also increase the intensity of a conflict if that is deemed more conducive to achieving objectives.¹¹ Little material exists outside of military sources, and nearly all of it is about shaping a war's specifics before it begins.¹²

Several fundamental strategic concepts likely ground the Chinese understanding of nuclear escalation. First, Chinese thinkers identify China's overall national strength as the most critical deterrent in avoiding conflict. Further, China's stated willingness to fight over its core interests is designed to serve as a deterrent, dissuading adversaries that presumably possess less commitment in regional disputes.¹³ However, there is a critical lack of understanding about PLA thinking on the subject of escalation, given the limits of credible, if not authoritative, military, and available academic sources. It is known that higher guidance was given to the PLA to think about the issue, as Chinese leadership has identified escalation dynamics as being of increasing importance. Of the available information, PLA texts often recommend conducting actions that read as quite escalatory but are not described as such.¹⁴ In Lonnie Henley's summation, Chinese strategists conclude that thanks to the nuclear revolution and economic interdependence, the world has been made "safe for war."¹⁵

CHINESE REVISIONISM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

American worries about Chinese strategic intentions towards the near Indo-

Pacific are often described as 'revisionist,' meaning China could revise the landscape of the region's security ties or other aspects through some illegitimate means of force or coercion.¹⁶ In nuclear relations, Chinese revisionism plays the agent's role that could fatally harm crisis stability. Within China, top-level documents, in the form of defense white papers, reiterate that Beijing's increased ability to deter is understood as necessary to defend itself.¹⁷ Chinese perspectives emphasize that it views itself as defending its sovereignty, unlike the United States or its allies' position. Therefore, it would consider itself to have higher stakes and threats to use force to be more credible.¹⁸ Perhaps alarmingly, this coexists along with an apparent lack of belief that the United States would attempt to manipulate the risk of nuclear escalation. The Chinese view sees the U.S. conception of nuclear weapons as a war-fighting method as being unlikely to be practiced. The expectation tends to be that the United States would seek to defuse the crisis, to avoid crossing a nuclear threshold or abandoning an ally. Moreover, in the latter case, Chinese strategists are far from seeing such abandonment as impossible.¹⁹ The potential for opportunistic activities to China's advantage is present. Manipulation and gradualistic tactics would be the natural path to revise the region. Faced with the reality of U.S. conventional superiority, coercive escalation is the most plausible method for adversaries to do so.

For the same reason that China has steadfastly resisted an arms race, it seeks to avoid a war.²⁰ Its rise of national strength and fundamental security depends upon a favorable international environment for its economic growth. A conflict with the United States would risk obliteration of this favorability. China, however, has been proactive in asserting its claims of sovereignty. Beijing has sought to do this throughout its maritime neighborhood using highly customized and generally sub-lethal capabilities. U.S. strategists usually describe these efforts as a 'gray zone' tactic, meaning operating between war and peace.²¹ In practice, such tactics would manifest as military or quasi-military actions. In contrast to U.S. views, the Chinese see these methods positively, as a low-level, peaceful means of achieving desired ends.

While the Chinese appreciation of gray zone tactics in conventional military action accepts the difficulty of successful control over conventional escalation, there is a different understanding of the nuclear domain.²² Most Chinese experts are confident that nuclear escalation would not occur under conditions of conventional war. For them, it is fear that drives restraint, given the risk of further nuclear escalation in the event of initial use.²³ U.S. strategists usually view further escalation as a coercive tool that can end a conflict. Most scenarios Chinese strategists construct about the failure of crisis stability concern uncontrolled escalation resulting from a U.S. attack against Chinese conventional missiles that could degrade nuclear capability.²⁴ According to Tong Zhao and Li Bin's analysis, China is more prone to interpret ambiguous

circumstances as an attack on its nuclear forces. This follows from concerns about a U.S. capability to disarm their own arsenal.²⁵ Coupled together, Chinese studies of escalation and the nuclear domain and a political commitment to revise its neighborhood in accordance with its core interests provide Chinese leadership a basis to deem their current or near-future capabilities commensurate with the risks involved in both. Chinese forces have advanced precisely the capabilities necessary to challenge its neighbors and the United States credibly.

CURRENT AND FUTURE CHINESE CONVENTIONAL CAPABILITIES

China is creating a military that can contest, and if necessary, fight and win, a war against the United States and its allies, even if this is done under circumstances of having achieved existential security with a nuclear arsenal and with no desire to initiate war. The conventional superiority of the United States is being degraded and at a severe disadvantage in-theater due to China's military advances and geographic proximity. A comprehensive RAND report that sought to understand the balance of U.S.-China conventional capabilities, specifically in the context of a Taiwan conflict, found a mixed picture for the United States as of 2017 in being able to successfully roll-back or prevent a Chinese invasion. Improvements in Chinese missile forces that can target airbases and aircraft carriers drove most of China's improved assessment.²⁶

The Chinese regional strategy is often described as anti-access and area denial (A2/AD). There is a Chinese intention to cordon off its immediate maritime periphery from U.S. intervention capabilities. U.S. responses have naturally followed to counter this threat. The U.S. Navy's AirSea Battle is explicitly set up against perceived Chinese intentions of achieving A2/AD.²⁷ Despite the emphasis U.S. strategists place on the component, achieving A2/AD is not a specific Chinese doctrine. Chinese forces and the doctrine underlying their creation related to A2/AD show up in specific PLA missions that different near theaters are assigned. However, in Chinese texts, the term A2/AD is never used, and the moniker of "counter-intervention" is used only rarely and never as a strategic term. It is not an overarching doctrine but a relevant element in Chinese campaigns. Crucially, doctrine takes the idea of such an intervention actively, but not proactively. It is never articulated that a prior effort to curtail third-party operations must be specifically achieved. This is notably the opposite of Soviet doctrine pertaining to A2/AD in eastern Europe. In Chinese defense planning, current operations that include a plan to curtail third-party intervention is applied explicitly to the Taiwan mission.²⁸ The clear Chinese presupposition of possible U.S. intervention into a regional conflict against a Chinese force inspired military forces' development to either

prevent this outcome entirely or make it appear too costly for the United States.

The United States, in turn, faces its dilemma if Chinese military action occurs. Any initial Chinese assertions will inaugurate escalation dynamics. The United States would naturally seek to roll back or deter further gains to prevent any creeping Chinese presence, and the intended or unintended impression of these responses will feed into Chinese decision making. Whether and how China militarily pursues revisionist intentions, and how threatening that will be to the United States and its allies, is unknowable. However, it is possible to better comprehend nuclear strategy and stability in the region by categorizing Chinese efforts to modernize its military capabilities in their service of its strategic ends. This is the place where U.S. responses must chart lessons of the Cold War.

STRATEGIC STABILITY BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

Strategic stability refers to an international situation wherein a state can consider its core security interests as broadly unthreatened. James Acton provides a useful categorization of the meanings of "strategic stability" for the nuclear domain. The most narrow and usual sense refers to an environment that does not incentivize either an arms race or conflict escalation. Alternatively, it can refer to a general absence of armed conflict between states that have nuclear arsenals.²⁹ Usually, U.S. analysts discuss strategic stability around the former option, and it is this definition that guides the use of the term in Nuclear Posture Reviews.³⁰ The meaning of the "strategic stability" term when used by Chinese strategists and government officials is not nearly so clear.³¹ This paper takes the view that while Chinese strategists who reject the concept as inapplicable given asymmetries between the United States and China are mistaken, neither is the typical Cold War-era typology applicable. The unique situation between conventional and nuclear domains, notably the lack of parity between China and the United States in both, requires an assessment of strategic stability that is not limited to strict evaluations of crisis stability or the more meager threat of arms racing. Due to Chinese operational thinking, this environment needs a cross-domain appraisal.

The United States approaches its China relationship with decades of Cold War nuclear deterrence ingrained but facing a situation where the logic is variably applicable. The compensation role of nuclear weapons initially found in the Cold War was for a conventionally inferior military. Now, the United States maintains superior conventional forces and a much larger nuclear arsenal. However, its commitment to extended nuclear deterrence remains fundamental to its nuclear strategy. The in-theater military strength of China and its geopolitical ambitions alarm U.S. allies. The concept of a U.S.

purchase of strategic stability at the expense of regional security guarantees is conceivable, depending upon how extended deterrence relies upon the threat of nuclear escalation to deter any aggression. The contemporary Indo-Pacific region has historical precedents in this regard. During the Cold War, mutual vulnerability (a situation where two nuclear-armed states are mutually capable of striking each other's homeland) necessitated that the United States devise intermediate options that did not jump from conventional war-making to total nuclear exchanges to demonstrate resolve. What necessitated this logic was the need to maintain alliance credibility and thus extended deterrence.³² If the United States could not credibly threaten the use of nuclear weapons in defense of its allies, the entire program of stopping Soviet revisionism was deemed hopeless.

MUTUAL VULNERABILITY AND LIMITED WAR

There were many Cold War-era debates about Soviet aggression becoming enabled under conditions of mutual vulnerability.³³ Whether this is more true under the U.S.-China relationship calls for appreciating the nature of mutual weakness between the two states. A nuclear mutual vulnerability exists between China and the United States, owing to their survivable arsenals. Chinese nuclear strategists wholly accept and desire this reality. The U.S. perspective, however, is more complicated. Viewed historically, mutual vulnerability is a composite of mutually assured destruction (MAD) and assured exposure. Successive U.S. administrations implicitly accepted vulnerability to the Soviet arsenal but never formally stated it was an acceptable reality. Ultimately, the U.S. debate regarding the Soviet Union never resolved, and China assumed the mantle of the debate once its assured retaliation materialized.³⁴

The Chinese reaction to U.S. reluctance to formally embrace mutual vulnerability is adverse.³⁵ In discussions about mutual vulnerability, Chinese delegation members describe it as a fact.³⁶ Jeffrey Lewis argues that U.S. debates about accepting mutual vulnerability are analogous to Chinese views about whether the United States thinks it can subject China to nuclear coercion.³⁷ The implication for the U.S. debate would be that to accept mutual vulnerability would forswear the use of nuclear threats to coerce any Chinese action. While the United States officially recognized the technical reality of mutual vulnerability in the 2009 Nuclear Posture Review, nothing was said about this status's desirability.³⁸ Crucially, allies' fears weigh significantly on such debates. In particular, Japanese concerns expressed that U.S. acceptance of mutual vulnerability with China could embolden Chinese conventional revisionism.³⁹

THE INDO-PACIFIC STABILITY-INSTABILITY PARADOX

The potential of conventional war under conditions of mutual nuclear vulnerability should be analyzed in the unique context of U.S.-China relations. The United States and China do not have the same geopolitical relationship of the Cold War. However, it is worth mining the dynamics of nuclear deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union for insights. This is especially true of the threat of limited conventional warfare below the nuclear threshold. After the Cold War's initial period, mutual vulnerability dawned between the two great powers, but the possibilities of initiating and escalating conventional, in-theater warfare did not cease. During the Cold War, Albert Wohlstetter and Colin Gray argued there would be a strict delineation between conflict nuclear deterrence covered and lower levels.⁴⁰ Other scholars, such as Robert Jervis, wrote of all levels of conflict as protected.⁴¹ Others noted that this new ultimate guarantor of stability could perversely enable instability in the form of limited war. Glenn Snyder coined the term "stability-instability paradox" to describe this situation.⁴²

Writing of Cold War nuclear dynamics, Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin specified that "if one of the things that prevents local wars is the fear of both sides that it will spiral to total war, then agreements make it less likely that this will happen and may end up making local war more likely. On the other hand, this could be a reasonable price for greater insurance that local war will not go to total war."⁴³ A similar dynamic to this confronts U.S. policymakers now. Compared to the Soviet Union, Chinese ideas about nuclear escalation, crisis stability, and the role of nuclear weapons and war-fighting are all substantially different. Applied to the most alarming candidate for Chinese revisionism, Taiwan, the new nuclear dynamic's implications are not sanguine.

While China has shown little inclination towards abandoning minimal deterrence, the relevance of limited deterrence is worth considering due to Taiwan's unique status. According to the glossary assembled between U.S. and Chinese strategists, limited deterrence "requires a limited war-fighting capability to inflict costly damage on the adversary at every rung on the escalation ladder, thus denying the adversary victory in a nuclear war."⁴⁴ Limited deterrence, then, can be seen as the addition of deterring conventional war to minimal deterrence. Conventional deterrence would seek to compel an adversary that they cannot initiate a low-cost, short-term conflict. The ability to deter work is linked to how likely a state decides it can achieve its ends in short order and not become stuck in a prolonged war.⁴⁵

China's theater advantage is biased towards short-term conflicts, as the United States would need time to assemble its conventional forces. Its operational basis is restricted to a small number of airbases and aircraft carriers, as opposed to substantial deployments on the Chinese mainland. The dangers

of a short-term Chinese victory over Taiwan, representing a grand revisionist move against U.S. interests, complicate nuclear strategy dynamics between the two powers due to Taiwan's unique geopolitical status. The differences between U.S. and Chinese views of deterrence illustrate the problem.

The Chinese conception of *wēishè*, with its incorporation of both compellence and deterrence, deviates from the U.S. concept of deterrence. The United States foresees compelling an adversary to withdraw, or to refrain from attacking, as being based upon a legitimate, pre-aggression status quo. Chinese strategists do not regard the U.S. anti-revisionist notion of a status quo as a reliable indicator.⁴⁶ The difficulty for the United States is that this logic in a limited war could be severe. The United States is, after all, seeking to deter Chinese action against, for instance, Taiwan. That is not coercive unless coercion is understood to mean anything that impedes Beijing from achieving its core interests towards Taiwan, something explicable given their conception of that territory as a core part of China. It is unclear how the Chinese NFU policy applies to the officially "internal" conflict of Taiwan.⁴⁷ Chinese strategists have a traditional view that nuclear deterrence is nuclear coercion. It is relevant whether they still view them as paper tigers. If so, Beijing might conclude that aggression against Taiwan would show this thought if any US intervention into a regional conflict was presumed to remain conventional. The uncertainty of the status quo's importance and China's nuclear posture towards the island present a dangerous scenario.

Several other characteristics of Chinese strategic thinking could bias Beijing towards riskier patterns of behavior. The prominent Chinese analyst Liu Chong argues the stability-instability paradox is obsolete.⁴⁸ For him, the stability-instability paradox cannot be applied to the U.S.-China relationship due to their economic entanglement and China not having a desire to compete with the United States in geopolitical contests, but only in the realm of global rulemaking. It cannot be expected that the limited, proxy conflicts of the United States and the Soviet Union would be replicated.⁴⁹ However, this logic misreads China's place in any potential conventional conflict. The unlikelihood of a conventional conflict between the United States and China is decreased if the conflict originates between China and a third party, only subsequently drawing in the United States. This scenario is not like the proxy wars of the Cold War. It is, however, like the threat of Soviet revisionism in central Europe. As such, the belief that peace will follow from a great power's unwillingness to fight the war is betting on only one of the parties - the United States.

Chong's second reason for the likelihood of peace argues that the United States and China could not face a proxy war due to the lack of geopolitical competition. However, this overlooks the possibility that a conventional war would not have to be similar to Korea or Vietnam. In fact, the Cold War saw the U.S. fretting about the stability-instability paradox being implicated in

a large-scale war between the Soviet Union and U.S. allies in Europe. Such existential stakes make nuclear escalation that much more alarming. Remote proxy conflicts do not have such stakes. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental geopolitical contest bearing on the U.S.-China relationship: Taiwan. For China, Taiwan is not an analog to a Cold War proxy war fought in a distant third country- its reclamation is the unfinished business of its civil war. Chinese disbelief in U.S. deterrence over Taiwan, alongside overconfidence in escalation control and a belief that its economic might wards off challenge, coexists with its mutual vulnerability with the United States. For the United States, finessing a strategy requires processing this perspective.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On a practical level, the stability-instability paradox is a result of alliances. For the United States, it is an unfortunate consequence of mutual vulnerability. While the instability-stability paradox in Asia does not directly affect a U.S. ally, the twin pressures of U.S. resolve and the Taiwan dilemma implicate the entire U.S. alliance system. Taiwan does not exist in a vacuum, and any forced geopolitical alteration would presumably affect U.S. allies' evaluations of U.S. security partnerships. This necessitates U.S. care over Taiwan's fate, as it could be the ground of its entire opposition to Chinese revisionism. An appropriate U.S. strategy must find a way to achieve stability, meaning both to avoid armed conflict, especially any tilt into nuclear escalation, and to prevent Chinese revisionism, goals which are far from harmonious. With this in mind, this paper makes two recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION TO FORMALLY RECOGNIZE MUTUAL VULNERABILITY AS POLICY

Mutual vulnerability is a real fact, and it is best to acknowledge it. While the United States should retain the threat of nuclear escalation as leverage against Chinese revisionism, its use as a hedging strategy against the reality of mutual vulnerability is an inappropriate corollary to retention. It does not send the message of anti-revisionism as much as the alarming image of nuclear superiority and is itself not conducive to the very peace that U.S. policy seeks. Not recognizing mutual vulnerability does not improve the outlook of plausible scenarios of limited and possible escalatory wars, even if it would have some marginal consequences on extended deterrence credibility. A fundamental component of any peaceful strategic stability between the United States and China requires mutual SSC. A formal recognition structures this. Of course, Beijing could prove simply too skeptical of U.S. intentions due to irreconcilable political differences.⁵⁰ Alternatively, it might not specifically pacify China

about ballistic missile defense or conventional capabilities that matter a great deal to Beijing. Nonetheless, the United States can advance nuclear dynamics' strategic stability and clarify its respectful intentions towards China's nuclear security guarantee.

RECOMMENDATION TO REJECT A MUTUAL NO-FIRST-USE POLICY

Advocates of a U.S. NFU argue it would promote strategic stability and that the United States does not need to use the threat of nuclear weapons because it lacks enemies that want to exploit a credibility gap to wage war. For their part, Chinese officials and delegations have been ritually pressing the United States for mutual NFU for decades.⁵¹ As an actual policy, there are two problems: alliance credibility and the preclusion of better U.S. strategy to curtail revisionism.

Ally reassurance is probably manageable with a declaration of mutual vulnerability. According to Nancy Gallagher, the Obama Administration was willing to acknowledge mutual vulnerability with China officially. The threat to alliances was deemed relatively low, but the administration opted to shelve the measure until it could be exchanged for a Chinese concession. The policy aimed to buttress U.S. reassurances to China that missile defense did not seek to degrade Chinese deterrence.⁵² Emboldened Chinese behavior is always alarming for U.S. allies. If U.S. policy ditches the leverage of nuclear escalation, it risks inviting less risk-averse Chinese behavior. If that behavior comes, U.S. allies could seek, in turn, to provide their own security, including the advent of nuclear arsenals. This would not better serve strategic stability for the region.

An NFU policy would also preclude the very leverage the United States needs to temper the stability-instability paradox's peril. The United States should tailor its nuclear strategy to deter Chinese attempts to revise the regional order, including in light of conventional methods that are crafted to impose escalation burdens upon the United States. The continuing diminished relevance of US conventional superiority in China's near abroad merits the retention of a declaratory policy that reserves the use of nuclear escalation to deter Chinese revisionism. Chinese confidence that aggression could work is the factor that threatens to inaugurate an escalatory cycle. The United States' best option is to prevent that confidence. American nuclear strategy can aim to prevent even a limited war of a revisionist nature. At the same time, the United States should be clear that it respects the reality of Chinese nuclear security and wants firm Chinese confidence in its deterrent. The dread of nuclear escalation can be leveraged for an inevitable but responsible contestation of the Indo-Pacific. The very danger of escalation itself is a relevant, plausible route to peace.

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