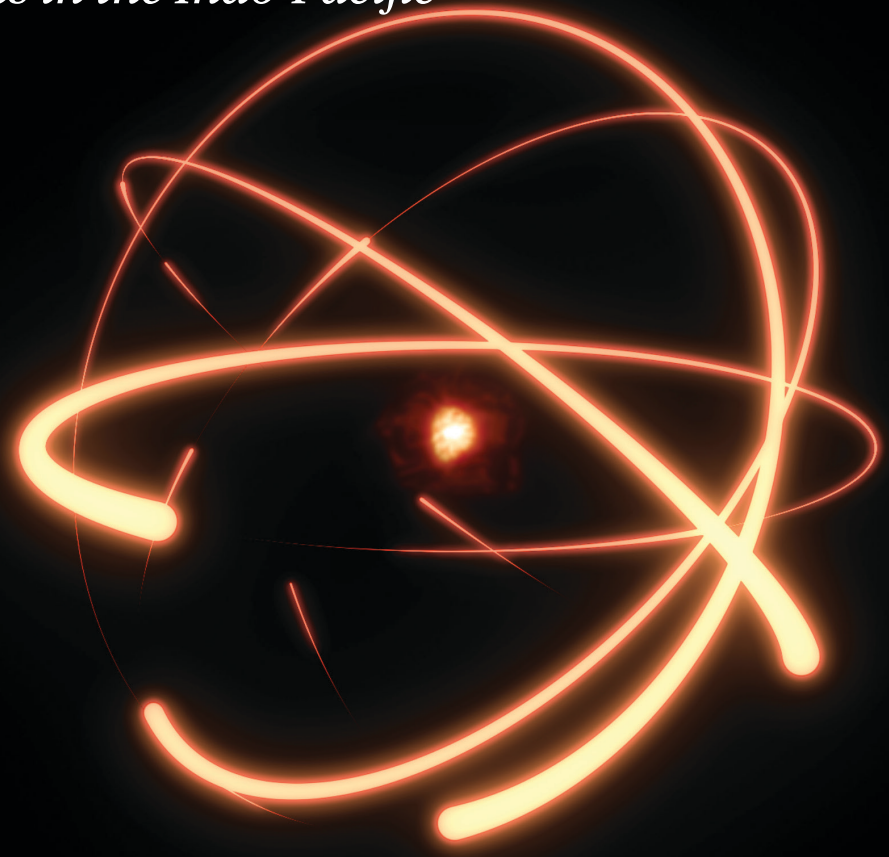
DECEMBER 2025

Project Atom 2025

Escalation Management in Acute and Protracted Conflicts in the Indo-Pacific



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A Report of the CSIS Project on Nuclear Issues

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Contents

Introduction

Heather Williams, Lachlan MacKenzie, and Elena Tiedens

There is no single or predetermined pathway to conflict with China. The U.S. Intelligence Community's 2025 Annual Threat Assessment outlines a host of potential "flashpoints" with China, to include its "advancing military capabilities for a cross-Strait campaign," economic coercion, and "aggressive efforts to assert sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas." The assessment outlines China's "whole-of-government" approach, including cyber and military operations, along with "influence operations short of war."[1]

The March 2025 interim National Defense Strategic Guidance listed China as the primary foreign threat to the United States and allocated $10 billion to the Pacific Deterrence Initiative and an additional $2.4 billion in support of Taiwan.[2] Although the details of the final 2025 National Defense Strategy are unknown as of November 2025, China remains one of the primary threats to U.S. national security. Political leaders from both parties continue to identify China as a significant national security threat. For example, the ranking members of the House committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—John R. Moolenar (R-Michigan) and Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-Illinois)—released a statement in January 2025 identifying China as "an unprecedented challenge to our economy, our national security, and our values," which they pledged to meet "with the urgency this moment demands."[3] House Chairman Mike Johnson (R-Louisiana) similarly labeled China as "the greatest threat to global peace" in 2024 remarks.[4]

For its part, China has rapidly expanded its entire suite of strategic capabilities in the past decade—in the space, cyber, conventional, and nuclear domains—and bolstered military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, holding seven major exercises in the region since 2022.[5] Chinese President Xi Jinping

has said that "no one can ever stop China's reunification [with Taiwan], a trend of the times."[6] Wargaming studies by U.S. think tanks have demonstrated how multiple factors, from preemptive Chinese strikes on U.S. bases to complex and evolving U.S. relationships with key allies, could advantage China in a Taiwan conflict. The nuclear threat also looms over any conflict between nuclear-armed adversaries and takes on greater importance in the U.S.-China relationship given the ongoing transformation of China's nuclear arsenal. China is adding rungs to the escalation ladder, and given the potential for asymmetry of stakes, this presents escalation management challenges for U.S. policymakers and strategists.

To generate new thinking on the risks of escalation with China, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Project on Nuclear Issues (PONI) made escalation management in the Indo-Pacific the theme of its 2025 Project Atom series and invited a group of experts to develop competing strategies for managing escalation with China. The Project Atom contributors—Mike Albertson, Matthew Costlow, Adam Mount, Kori Schake, and Rebecca Shrimpton—each wrote a 5,000–6,000-word strategy using a shared analytic framework. This study draws upon an approach that CSIS developed a decade ago, in a more stable security environment, to explore nuclear issues. The approach was then revived in 2023 to review U.S. strategy for deterring two peer competitors over a five-year time horizon. The strategies in this study focus on four specific themes: stakes and strategic objectives, escalation risks, military tools, and diplomatic tools. The strategies demonstrate agreement on key issues, including U.S. and Chinese objectives and the importance of deterrence. But the strategies also highlight disagreements about the utility of nuclear weapons for deterrence and escalation management. The views expressed are those of the individual contributors and do not represent the views of PONI or CSIS. While some may disagree with the authors' positions, PONI believes that including a wide range of views is essential to fostering robust debate.

The United States may need to increase its reliance on nuclear weapons and deploy a more diverse nuclear arsenal in the region, along with clearly communicating the stakes of a conflict in the region to U.S. and allied publics and investing in the defense industrial base.

Based on the five expert competitive strategies included in this volume, and after assessing them on their merits, Project Atom 2025 offers three main arguments. First, escalation is neither desirable nor undesirable to the United States. Second, escalation management in the Indo-Pacific will depend on U.S. advantages and disadvantages across vertical, horizontal, and temporal vectors. Relatedly, without significant shifts to U.S. defense and industrial policy, time will not be on the United States' side. These challenges will be particularly difficult in protracted conflicts, which have received less attention, with some important exceptions.[7] And third, to compensate for the inadequacy of existing U.S. forces for deterring and managing escalation with two near-peers, the

United States may need to increase its reliance on nuclear weapons and deploy a more diverse nuclear arsenal in the region, along with clearly communicating the stakes of a conflict in the region to U.S. and allied publics and investing in the defense industrial base. These arguments may present additional challenges for strategic stability, which is why keeping the door open for dialogue with Beijing and exploring off-ramp options should also be part of Washington's escalation management strategy.

This introduction proceeds in three main sections. First, it identifies challenges of escalation in the Indo-Pacific and why existing escalation management tools may be insufficient in a U.S.-China conflict across multiple scenarios. It then compares the Project Atom authors' analyses of stakes and objectives, escalation risks, and the roles of military and diplomatic tools for escalation management. The introduction focuses on three vectors of escalation—vertical, horizontal, and temporal—to identify the policy implications and recommendations from the authors' arguments. Ultimately, the introduction concludes that the United States may have to consider increasing its reliance on nuclear weapons in order to gain a strategic advantage in both acute and protracted conflicts for escalation management purposes.

America at a Disadvantage? Challenges of Escalation Management in the Indo-Pacific

The Project Atom 2025 strategies address a shared primary research question: What tools and approaches can the United States use to manage escalation risks with China in the Indo-Pacific across a range of scenarios? During the Cold War, U.S. nuclear strategist Herman Kahn defined escalation as "an increase in the level of conflict in international crisis situations."[8] Following from this definition, escalation has historically been treated as undesirable because of the potential consequences of it leading to nuclear use.[9] While Cold War–era scholarship largely conceptualized escalation as a linear ladder with graduated steps leading to nuclear use, contemporary scholarship takes a more nuanced approach. More recent scholarship on nonlinear escalation wormholes has emphasized how gray area tools, including cyber disinformation, create situations in which the boundaries between these tools and conventional and nuclear weapons are blurred.[10] The dismantlement of firebreaks between conventional and nuclear weapons creates a potential additional pathway for nuclear use.

In this new context, U.S. nuclear policy expert Madison Estes offered a useful framework for thinking about escalation management that draws on both Cold War and contemporary scholarship. Estes argues that the United States should manage escalation through achieving objectives at the lowest possible costs, including assuring allies and partners, limiting the scope and intensity of a conflict, and facilitating conflict termination.[11] Tools for escalation management range from military intervention to diplomatic signaling and include deterrence, employment of military force, messaging, and off-ramps. Escalation management encompasses precrisis, crisis, and wartime activities. Ultimately, escalation management is an exercise in shaping adversary behavior.

In this introduction, the authors highlight three escalation management challenges for the United States, but it is important to emphasize that these are primarily considerations for the medium- to long-term. The first major challenge is a *perceived* asymmetry of stakes between the United States and China. Although a Taiwan contingency is not the only feasible scenario for conflict in the Indo-Pacific, Xi has consistently indicated that unification with Taiwan is a national security priority built on a shared cultural heritage. Conversely, the United States is thousands of miles away, and isolationism appears to be on the rise in U.S. politics. President Trump's "America First" approach to national security and his questioning of allied contributions to defense in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific have raised questions about U.S. commitments to allies and partners. On the other hand, much rides on a Taiwan conflict for the United States, including being able to protect U.S. assets in Taiwan and the broader Indo-Pacific, maintain regional and global legitimacy, assure allies and partners, deter—and, failing that, halt—any wider Chinese ambitions beyond the Western Pacific, and even maintain a rules-based international order. Whether there is an actual asymmetry of stakes, how the stakes are perceived by both sides in a conflict will shape how it unfolds and how they choose to escalate, or not.

The United States must be ready for conflicts over Taiwan, on the Korean Peninsula, in the South China Sea, and stemming from military accidents—each presenting distinct escalation dynamics and challenges.

A second challenge is the potential variability in the *character* of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, requiring extreme flexibility in any strategy for escalation management, to include potential military capabilities and diplomatic tools. The need to prepare for a wide range of potential contingencies complicates efforts to develop escalation management strategies in advance. The United States must be ready for conflicts over Taiwan, on the Korean Peninsula, in the South China Sea, and stemming from military accidents—each presenting distinct escalation dynamics and challenges. Although the United States may choose to draw on allies' support if conflict occurs, it is possible that not all allies would be willing to engage politically or militarily. Perhaps Japan and Australia would come to the United States' aid in an East or South China Sea conflict but not in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. This discrepancy highlights the necessity of a robust and flexible deterrent in a potential China conflict. Furthermore, increasing cooperation between China, Russia, and North Korea creates the possibility that a conflict originating in the Indo-Pacific could spread to other theaters via coordinated or opportunistic aggression. Adding to this complexity is uncertainty about the duration of any potential conflict.

Finally, the rapid *expansion* of China's nuclear arsenal presents an additional challenge for the United States. The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that China will have 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, up from 300 in 2020.[12] As part of its buildup, China is fielding novel and theater-

range capabilities. Although the United States currently possesses a superior number of B61s, air-launched cruise missiles, and low-yield ballistic missiles, this theater advantage could shrink given the scale and speed of China's nuclear buildup. Prominent Chinese defense thinkers have suggested that escalation would be unmanageable after the use of nuclear weapons and expect that U.S. and Chinese leaders would therefore choose to constrain any conflict to the conventional level.[13] Although this kind of thinking remains the dominant paradigm in the political circles of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers have begun to consider the role of limited nuclear options.[14] In this context, China has repeatedly rejected U.S. proposals for arms control talks and shares very little information about its nuclear forces and policy. In fact, when pressed, China has misrepresented its arsenal, for example, once suggesting that a field of silos were windmills.[15] Moreover, China's past behavior demonstrates that Chinese leaders are relatively unconcerned about the risks of conventional escalation: China has repeatedly ignored U.S. overtures for dialogue during periods of heightened tension.[16] An increasingly aggressive China in the Indo-Pacific, backed by nuclear weapons, could undermine key U.S. objectives in the region.

As a result of these risks and challenges, the U.S. expert community has produced dozens of war games, tabletop exercises, and reports exploring potential conflicts with China. Since 2020, think tanks and other nongovernmental researchers have published at least 20 major reports and analyses of possible U.S.-China crises and conflicts. These war games have varied in length, ranging from one day to dozens of turns, and focus, to include decisionmaking processes and apolitical operations.

One area where the war games have shown inconsistency in their findings is whether the United States can win and/or would benefit from a short- or long-lasting conflict. On the one hand, Cancian et al. (2023) note that China can isolate Taiwan in a protracted conflict, and therefore the United States should act decisively to avoid delaying victory. Consequently, Taiwan must hold out long enough for U.S. support to arrive.[17] Conversely, war games from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) suggest that there are no quick victory options for the United States. A 2022 CNAS war game went so far as to conclude that "neither side was able to decisively win in the initial week of fighting."[18] A later CNAS war game (2024), however, warned that a protracted conflict could increase incentives for nuclear use by China, concluding: "The United States is currently ill-equipped in its concepts and capabilities to manage escalation risks in the emerging Indo-Pacific era."[19] The Cancian et al. war games also pointed to risks of nuclear use, particularly when China could be facing significant losses. Collectively, these exercises contribute important details about how escalation in the Indo-Pacific might happen, but escalation management analysis remains a gap.

Authors' Findings

Unlike past iterations of Project Atom, this study is not based on a predetermined scenario, but rather asked authors to acknowledge their assumptions about the stakes and potential escalation scenarios up front and then answer a series of questions about U.S. strategy and the capabilities and response options needed to achieve U.S. objectives. Project Atom asked the authors to observe the following assumptions in their analyses using a five-year time horizon:

- U.S. nuclear modernization is proceeding as planned, to include the development of a nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N).
- A world without nuclear weapons remains a distant ambition, and there are no new arms control initiatives.
- The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) has expired with no replacement and China continues to reject U.S. overtures to engage in arms control dialogue.
- The United States' allies and partners remain the same as they are in fall 2025, with no new alliance structures in the Indo-Pacific.
- The AUKUS partnership is continuing apace but is anticipated to fall behind schedule in submarine production, potentially affecting the delivery of Virginia-class submarines to Australia.
- Some of the United States' nonnuclear allies and partners, such as South Korea, continue to express an interest in an independent nuclear program, but have not taken any concrete steps toward achieving it.

Tables 1–4 capture each paper's key arguments about stakes, risks, and escalation management tools. Areas of agreement and disagreement are explored below in greater detail.

Table 1: The Stakes

Albertson	▪ "Discussions on the stakes regarding Taiwan have been largely cast as quasi-existential in the United States. This framing is not surprising, as, for example, China hawks attempt to draw attention and resources to the specific challenge, and past and present U.S. administrations try to signal to their interlocutors in Beijing that they consider the stakes high and that there is not an asymmetry of stakes waiting to be tested and exploited by China." ▪ "In such an all-or-nothing understanding, the 'loss' of Taiwan is framed as a significant regional setback in the Asia-Pacific, a major blow to the United States as the perceived preeminent global power, and a further deterioration of the rules-based international order." ▪ "U.S. regional allies including Japan, South Korea, and Australia see the loss of Taiwan as presaging a weakened regional U.S. presence and future bullying by Beijing, forcing them to choose between accommodation or coercion, with little wiggle room in between." ▪ "A failed attempt to seize Taiwan is a potential prelude to the end of the Xi regime or even the potential fall of the Chinese Communist Party."

Costlow	▪ "If U.S. stakes in a crisis or conflict are defined as the relative damage or benefit to U.S. national interests that may result from the outcome, then the stakes could range from significant to vital, depending on the nature of the event and the perceptions of U.S. leaders." ▪ "Even a relatively restrained conflict in the Indo-Pacific, at least in its beginning stages, could easily pose global risks to vital U.S. national interests." ▪ "The stakes for U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and across the globe over a conflict about the fate of Taiwan could range from significant to existential." ▪ "Chinese leaders consider the stakes over Taiwan to be at *least* a vital national interest, and potentially an existential national interest."
Mount	▪ "The [United States'] central objective is to defend the core interests of U.S. allies in the region, including their territorial integrity, democratic governance free of foreign interference, and secure connection to the network of international trade." ▪ "First, China seeks to attain freedom of military action in the region to support its expansionist territorial claims and coercion of neighboring states." ▪ "Second, China seeks to isolate its neighbors from U.S. influence, undermining the network of alliances and partnerships that is intended to provide vulnerable countries with an alternative to Chinese hegemony."
Schake	▪ "Narrowly, the stakes for the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific come down to two objectives: (1) maintaining the physical and political sovereignty of Taiwan, and (2) preventing PRC control of disputed territories and economic assets." ▪ "Letting China conquer Taiwan would collapse confidence in U.S. willingness to continue upholding the sovereignty of regional allies, requiring either a dramatic increase in the cost of reestablishing reassurance or much greater instability and compensation strategies by countries in the region." ▪ "China's strategic objectives appear to be fundamentally at odds with those of Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Canberra, and Taipei—namely, ending Taiwan's political and physical sovereignty, and severing the lifeline of U.S. security guarantees to regional countries."

Shrimpton	▪ "China seeks to build a credible capability to control the seas, skies, and space over the Indo-Pacific, which could deny the United States the ability to operate freely from key regional bases, including critical air, naval, and missile defense facilities hosted on Guam." ▪ "China must edge the United States out of the Indo-Pacific and remove the primary threat it presents to China's ability to operate with relative regional freedom of maneuver." ▪ "U.S. regional allies do not want the United States to retreat from the Indo-Pacific region and thus enable China to assert greater political, economic, and military influence and control."

Table 2: Primary Escalation Risks

Albertson	▪ "Escalation in the Indo-Pacific could take many forms. It could be automatic or voluntary, symmetric or asymmetric, linear or circular, fast or slow. In all likelihood, escalation will comprise some formulation of these at different points on the conflict spectrum." ▪ "U.S.-China scenarios generally fall into three camps: China initiates (either purposefully or inadvertently); the United States initiates (either purposefully or inadvertently); or an external catalyst initiates a crisis or conflict (either purposefully or inadvertently)." ▪ "Escalation risks are further heightened by other factors. China will be operating in a complex battlespace with sophisticated but unproven forces and capabilities. Among the great powers, military capabilities are largely untested in conflict against modern systems fielded by the other side."
Costlow	▪ "The uncomfortable truth is that CCP leaders may be highly motivated to stay the course in their revisionist actions despite the risks and deterrence signals the United States and its allies send. In fact, they might even see their immediate and escalatory aggression as the most palatable of a host of strategic courses of action." ▪ "If the United States reacts to Chinese actions in the way CCP leaders anticipate, Washington risks reinforcing Beijing's perception that they can both anticipate and control the escalation process to their benefit." ▪ "Thus, it is safe to assume that CCP officials will seek a fait accompli over Taiwan if they cannot achieve control over the island through other means."

Mount	▪ "While the United States and its allies will prepare for a broad range of possible contingencies, only two scenarios carry a high risk of precipitating a general war and nuclear crisis: Chinese aggression against Taiwan and Chinese involvement following North Korean aggression against South Korea or Japan." ▪ "There are three primary escalation pathways that could precipitate a U.S.-China nuclear crisis. First, a limited conflict could escalate inadvertently . . . Second, China could carry out nuclear first use if it were losing a limited conflict . . . Third, the United States could carry out nuclear first use if it were losing a limited conflict."

Schake	▪ "There are four primary escalation risks for a U.S.-China conflict:
	  ▪ China attempts to force Taiwanese capitulation by bombardment or invasion;
	  ▪ China attacks a U.S. ally and the United States joins the fight to protect Australia, Japan, the Philippines, or South Korea;
	  ▪ China impedes access to Taiwan by blockading either inside or beyond Taiwan's territorial waters; and
	  ▪ China accidentally engages military forces operating in proximity, the result of either reckless unprofessionalism by the PRC military or use of gray zone civilian fishing fleets in conjunction with PRC navy activities in disputed waters and islands."
	▪ "In these and virtually all scenarios, it benefits China to act and then to escalate quickly . . . It benefits China to present a fait accompli if it can, resulting in the more difficult reversal of military gains rather than the prevention of them, and foisting onto the United States and its allies decisions of appropriate response."

Shrimpton	▪ "Given current global dynamics, the roads to conflict in the Indo-Pacific are highly unpredictable and complex. One plausible and potentially catastrophic scenario for the United States and its regional allies is Chinese aggression to achieve a fait accompli invasion of Taiwan." ▪ "The United States and its regional allies in the Indo-Pacific need to contemplate hostile actions as diverse as cyberattacks; foreign interference; limited or total blockades; limited invasions (e.g., offshore islands); a full-scale invasion of Taiwan; the use of sophisticated anti-access, area-denial systems for offensive and defensive purposes; and the possible use of nuclear weapons for carefully calculated effects." ▪ "Other regional scenarios could tip into conflict, with multiple flashpoints of specific concern." ▪ "Further instability is created by the potential for miscalculation from provocations involving space and offensive cyber operations that could trigger terrestrial conflicts."

Table 3: Military Tools for Escalation Management

Albertson	▪ "Given the uncertainties discussed above, deterring Chinese initiation of a conflict remains the most effective U.S. tool for escalation management." ▪ "U.S. military tools ideally would inflict more human casualties on the adversary than they would put U.S. personnel at risk. The tools would provide options for both symmetrical and asymmetrical responses at every rung on the escalation ladder and in various warfighting domains, and would be cost-effective." ▪ "The United States' escalation management strategy would need to rely on greater transparency to clearly and openly show U.S. and allied capabilities and resolve." ▪ "The U.S. and allied military strategy for escalation management would be far less . . . [clear] should China choose to initiate a crisis or conflict."
Costlow	▪ "The most effective U.S. deterrence and escalation management tools will be those that most threaten the Chinese theory of victory, meaning the United States should focus its procurement efforts on weapons systems that are resilient, survivable, and forward-deployed (or deployable) in theater." ▪ "If China believes that the United States lacks the will or capability to employ theater nuclear weapons selectively during a Taiwan contingency, it may play into China's belief that it can control the pace and scope of escalation." ▪ "Theater nuclear capabilities such as nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-Ns) have a significant role to play in this contingency as highly survivable launch platforms that provide the president with multiple options to employ selectively and toward discrete limited ends." ▪ "Both U.S. homeland and regional missile defenses will also play critical roles in deterring and defeating Chinese coercive threats, especially in a fait accompli scenario."

Mount	▪ "For U.S. officials, effective escalation management depends on having credible capabilities to escalate at will and credible means of committing to refrain from escalating." ▪ "Absent the conventional capability to deny China control of Taiwan, coercive nuclear employment would probably not decisively shift the outcome of the conflict." ▪ "Confronting China's attempt at local primacy requires conventional denial—principally, the capability to physically deny Chinese forces access to the territory of neighboring Indo-Pacific countries aligned with the United States." ▪ "Relying on nuclear options for escalation management can have significant disadvantages for resolving the conflict on terms favorable to the United States and its allies, especially at lower levels of escalation."
Schake	▪ "The roles of the military in escalation management comprise preventing near-term failure, providing options, attempting to hold the current situation in place while other means are applied to attain success, and, failing all else, preventing China from achieving its objectives by military force." ▪ "The more integrated, and publicly acknowledged, conventional and nuclear forces are, the less likely China or allies are to believe the United States would fail to escalate, and therefore, the stronger the deterrence of those forces."
Shrimpton	▪ "The military tools best placed to play a role in strategic deterrence in the Indo-Pacific include the U.S. nuclear triad of weapons and delivery systems." ▪ "Dispersed conventional long-range, standoff, and precision-strike missiles located within credible geographic ranges of key targets would signal a nascent combined capability." ▪ "Space, cyber, and undersea military capabilities offer dual-use growth paths for U.S.-led regional cooperation and should be a key focus given their prioritization within Chinese strategy and military writings."

Table 4: Off-Ramps, Arms Control, and Risk Reduction

Albertson	▪ "As noted above, the dilemma centers on how escalation management measures can be available in moments of crisis and conflict, when they are most necessary, if such measures cannot be agreed upon and preestablished in peacetime, when it theoretically would be easier but less pressing to do so." ▪ "There is . . . little meaningful arms control between the United States and China aimed at limiting either power's military capabilities or behaviors." ▪ "Off-ramps when presented are often unappealing to the aggressor and therefore are untaken, thus appearing frustrating and escalatory to their constructor." ▪ "Attempts must be made to pre-experience and preconstruct off-ramps that are assessed to be more important or more likely to occur."
Costlow	▪ "Given China's refusal to engage in significant risk-reduction fora or even in bilateral discussions, the United States is fairly limited in its ability to seek to reduce risks of escalation." ▪ "The threat of crippling economic sanctions, for instance, may prove to be a helpful tool in deterring a Chinese attack against Taiwan since the CCP's power base relies on providing a level of economic prosperity domestically." ▪ "The United States can continue pursuing fora on expanding nonmilitary risk-reduction measures with China, such as prelaunch notifications, track 1 and 2 dialogues, and military-to-military communication channels." ▪ "Nonetheless, should China continue to value opacity over dialogue, the United States could mount a concerted effort in conjunction with allies to speak with nonaligned states, or those inclined to side with China, on matters of nonproliferation."
Mount	▪ "Prospects for meaningful, bilateral, negotiated risk-reduction measures between the United States and China are limited." ▪ "Unilateral public statements that define nuclear firebreaks and establish declaratory restraints on conventional and nuclear forces may have more value." ▪ "In a conflict, leaders may be more likely to correctly interpret their adversary's intentions if they can verify that their opponent's military operations are adhering to their prewar declaratory statements."

Schake	▪ "Given the enduring political stakes and Chinese manipulation of connectivity in order to impose risk on the United States and its allies, off-ramps and other risk-reduction strategies hold little potential in a China-U.S. conflict involving Taiwan." ▪ "A possible path to risk reduction is strengthening deterrence. This could take many forms: expanding the United States' nuclear arsenal, establishing true ballistic and cruise missile defenses of the United States, expanding nuclear sharing with allies, reintroducing nuclear weapons with U.S. forces stationed in allied countries, significantly improving conventional military forces, and strengthening U.S. and allied defense industry through coproduction." ▪ "A less ambitious approach to risk reduction would be to solidify the U.S. main advantage—allied cooperation. Burden sharing with allies can increase the assets available to challenge China with economy of scale politically, militarily, and economically."
Shrimpton	▪ "Options for de-escalation through military, diplomatic, and other nonmilitary means—while implausible in the current moment—should continue to be actively pursued." ▪ "The absence of a meaningful, practiced, and trustworthy means to communicate during escalations, incidents, and crises is a serious escalation risk itself. Despite being consistently rebuffed, the United States should continue to extend the invitation to the PLA [People's Liberation Army] to establish such communications as a responsible act." ▪ "Alongside military activities across the peacetime-to-conventional-and-possible-nuclear-war continuum, the goal of risk-reduction activities is to convince Xi Jinping that 'today is not the day' to take on the United States and its allies in a military confrontation in the Indo-Pacific."

STAKES AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The authors' views are largely aligned concerning U.S. and Chinese objectives and the stakes of a potential conflict. One contributor, Mount, describes the United States' central objective as defending "the core interests of U.S. allies in the region, including their territorial integrity, democratic governance free of foreign interference, and secure connection to the network of international trade." Mount defines China's two primary objectives as achieving regional military dominance to "support its expansionist territorial claims and coercion of neighboring states" and "to isolate its neighbors from U.S. influence." Schake similarly identifies China's objectives as "ending Taiwan's political and physical sovereignty" and "severing the lifeline of U.S. security guarantees to regional countries." Schake argues that a successful invasion of Taiwan would "collapse confidence" in worldwide U.S. security guarantees. Costlow echoes this concern, writing that, for U.S. allies, "The stakes . . . over a conflict about the fate of Taiwan could range from significant to existential." Beyond Taiwan, Costlow argues that even a limited conflict with China

"could easily pose global risks to vital U.S. national interests" given the risks of opportunistic aggression. Albertson writes that a conflict over Taiwan could have severe consequences for the United States and China but cautions that both sides are incentivized to overstate the potential stakes of a conflict.

ESCALATION RISKS

While the authors identify Taiwan as the most dangerous potential flashpoint between the United States and China, they list a wide range of potential alternative escalation pathways. Schake, for example, highlights an invasion of Taiwan as one of four concerning scenarios, alongside China attacking a U.S. ally, China impeding access to Taiwan, and an accidental engagement of military forces operating in proximity. Albertson expands this further, listing nine possible scenarios for the start of a U.S.-China conflict, including opportunistic aggression, coordinated aggression between China and Russia, and a trade war gone hot. Shrimpton similarly acknowledges the range of escalation pathways and adds cyberattacks and foreign interference to the list of possible flashpoints. In contrast, Mount assesses that only two scenarios risk provoking a general war or nuclear crisis: aggression against Taiwan and "Chinese involvement following North Korean aggression against South Korea or Japan," and notes that other flashpoints probably "would not implicate the core interests of the United States, its partners, or China." Regarding how a conflict might unfold, Shrimpton, Costlow, and Schake assess that China would move as quickly as possible to achieve its objectives.

MILITARY TOOLS FOR ESCALATION MANAGEMENT

Nearly all the authors view deterrence as the most effective escalation management tool, but they differ both on the best approach for strengthening deterrence and on the utility of nuclear weapons for escalation management. Several authors call for additional theater nuclear capabilities. Costlow, for example, argues that theater nuclear capabilities "have a significant role to play" in strengthening deterrence and managing escalation. Schake similarly suggests that an expanded U.S. nuclear force could strengthen deterrence, and Albertson advocates for military tools at each rung of the escalation ladder, including new theater nuclear capabilities. Shrimpton names the U.S. nuclear triad, along with conventional long-range, precision-strike systems and missile defenses, as the capabilities most important for deterrence. In contrast, Mount warns that "Relying on nuclear options for escalation management can have significant disadvantages for resolving the conflict on terms favorable to the United States and its allies." Fearing crisis instability as well as the costs of an arms race, Mount concludes that greater reliance on nuclear capabilities for deterrence would undermine the credibility of U.S. deterrence with China, create challenges for assurance, and be militarily ineffective in the event of a conflict. Mount's paper raises a fundamental question about the role of nuclear versus conventional weapons in escalation management, which is explored below in greater detail in the context of a protracted conflict.

OFF-RAMPS, ARMS CONTROL, AND OTHER RISK-REDUCTION TOOLS FOR ESCALATION MANAGEMENT

The authors agree that diplomatic risk reduction with China faces significant obstacles but diverge on how to respond to these challenges. Arguing that risk reduction is unlikely "given China's refusal

to engage in significant risk-reduction fora or even in bilateral discussions," Costlow suggests that large-scale economic sanctions may be the most effective nonmilitary tool for deterrence and escalation management. Echoing Costlow's skepticism about diplomatic engagement, Schake expresses doubt about the utility of risk reduction, given China's "manipulation of connectivity in order to impose risk on the United States and its allies," and instead proposes strengthening deterrence and cooperation with allies. Other authors advocate for continued diplomatic efforts. Shrimpton expresses concern about the lack of crisis communication between the United States and China and recommends that the United States continue to make outreach efforts. Albertson argues for developing off-ramps for the most likely and concerning crisis scenarios in advance. Mount suggests that unilateral public statements defining "nuclear firebreaks and establishing declaratory restraints on conventional and nuclear forces" may help to control escalation. To summarize, this category contained the widest range of views and no clear consensus among the authors: For some, escalation management requires all sticks and very few carrots, whereas for others, costly signals, such as unilateral strategic transparency, could play a role in escalation management.

Risks and Points of Leverage in Vertical, Horizontal, and Temporal Escalation

The authors' papers point to escalation risks and management tools across three vectors: vertical, to include potential nuclear weapons use; horizontal, to include geographic expansion of the conflict to U.S. allies or the U.S. homeland; and temporal, to include changing escalation risks over time, from acute to protracted. The likelihood of escalation, along with the United States' ability to manage escalation at various stages of a conflict with China, will depend on U.S. strengths and weaknesses in each of these vectors. For each vector, this introduction considers the escalation risks and then how the authors' escalation management strategies would address those risks. While vertical and horizontal escalation are relatively familiar concepts, the temporal challenges of escalation management, particularly during a protracted conflict, are relatively less well examined.

VERTICAL ESCALATION: FROM CONVENTIONAL TO NUCLEAR USE

Recent war-gaming has suggested a growing risk of vertical escalation from conventional warfighting to nuclear use in the Indo-Pacific. Despite China's proclaimed "no first use" policy, many recent studies and war games have identified scenarios in which China would consider the first use of a tactical nuclear weapon advantageous. In a 2024 war game conducted by CSIS, China escalated with nuclear strikes against U.S. and Taiwanese forces during an attempted invasion of Taiwan in the face of conventional defeat.[20] The U.S. nuclear deterrent would not necessarily succeed in deterring China from using nuclear weapons in efforts to end or secure victory in a high-stakes conflict.[21] Indeed, a 2024 CNAS report concluded that "a hypothetical, protracted U.S.-PRC conflict creates conditions under which nonstrategic nuclear weapons use is both appealing to the PRC and difficult to manage for the United States."[22]

Vertical nuclear escalation, however, is not one sided. In an Atlantic Council study, Matthew Kroenig considered situations in which the United States would escalate a conflict with China through nuclear use. The United States could use its tactical nuclear weapons if China appeared close to

victory in Taiwan, or if China had struck the U.S. homeland with conventional weapons during a conflict.[23] With opportunities for nuclear first use on both the Chinese and U.S. sides, conventional armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific could quickly escalate to limited nuclear strikes. The question of how to manage risk and prevent a rupture in the nuclear taboo will depend on "U.S. capabilities and will" *and* "China's perceptions of U.S. capabilities and will," to use Costlow's terms.

The Project Atom authors take diverse approaches to managing vertical escalation risks in an Indo-Pacific conflict. Although comprehensive diplomatic forums may prove unlikely, Mount proposes unilateral public statements as a key tool for managing vertical escalation. These statements would clarify key thresholds on nuclear use for both countries before war begins. During conflict, both sides should be able to verify the adversaries' compliance with declaratory policy and thus foster a form of trust even in the most trying times. For the United States, unilateral public statements could clarify the threshold for U.S. nuclear first use in a conflict with China, including in cases of conventional or nuclear threats to the U.S. homeland. The United States could also declare that it would consider preemptive strikes on adversaries' nuclear forces under the same threshold as nuclear first use.

Other strategies stress the value of "military tools" for escalation management and deterring vertical escalation, to include nuclear use. Costlow, for example, is skeptical of the utility of diplomatic tools, writing that because China has rejected good-faith U.S. efforts at dialogue, "U.S. attempts to minimize the risk of escalation with China may, on many occasions, best be accomplished unilaterally—that is, through deterrence." As such, Costlow as well as Schake and Albertson suggest that the United States will need to invest in and expand its conventional and nuclear deterrents in the region. Although an expanded U.S. deterrent could come in many forms, Schake urges in part for an expanded nuclear arsenal and, crucially, nuclear burden sharing with allies in the region. All authors identify allies as a key U.S. strategic advantage in conflict with China—and one that China too perceives as threatening. A bolstered nuclear deterrent and strengthened partnerships with allies would allow the United States to respond flexibly in a conflict. Not beholden to limited and inflexible basing or the constraints of strategic nuclear weapons, the United States could act swiftly to conventionally target identified and valued Chinese assets, for example, by cutting off oil transit in the Indian Ocean.

As the United States seeks to manage escalation dynamics in a conflict with China, it should strive to maintain a robust deterrent, and if deterrence fails, be ready to respond with agility that reflects the unpredictability of war against China. This pathway does not rule out Mount's and others' recommendations for diplomatic options, but does call into question the deterrent value of transparency, as the United States may need to practice ambiguity in its strategic doctrine for vertical escalation management.

HORIZONTAL ESCALATION: THREATS TO U.S. ALLIES AND THE HOMELAND

The second vector of escalation is horizontal, whereby a conflict over Taiwan could spread to another theater, threaten U.S. allies, or cross into non-kinetic domains. War games and studies have illuminated the potential for conflict to spread beyond a Taiwan scenario. The 2022 CNAS war game captured how war in Taiwan could quickly escalate to Chinese attacks on U.S. military

bases in Guam and Japan, as well as on Japanese and allied bases. Eventually, the CNAS war game escalated to Chinese strikes in Hawaii, Alaska, and California.[24] To characterize these strikes as solely horizontal escalation would be a mistake, as CNAS and others have shown how the risks of nuclear use often intersect with a broader geographical scope of war, especially if attacks occur in the U.S. homeland or mainland China. The joint specter of vertical and horizontal escalation was on stark display in China's September 2025 military parade, in which the PLA displayed ICBMs capable of hitting the continental United States but did not exhibit intermediate nuclear forces with regional ranges. At its military parade, China's message was a clear one: If the United States were to provoke China, the Asian power could threaten the continental United States.

The United States could also initiate horizontal escalation in a conflict with China. Schake, in fact, encourages the United States to consider engaging in horizontal escalation in a potential conflict with China, arguing that the United States could strike Chinese artificial islands or its base in Djibouti to damage key elements of the Chinese war-fighting apparatus. U.S. alliances could further enable attacks on Chinese interests across multiple regions and domains. Along these lines, Shrimpton's paper notes that the United States and allies in the region should engage in track 1, 1.5, and 2 negotiations to further joint deterrence and defense capabilities. While a more robust regional alliance system may enhance deterrence, it also presents political and practical challenges, including joint exercising and operations, competing national priorities and interests, and vast distances.

Yet, even if horizontal escalation between the United States and China is limited, war games demonstrate how other states—including North Korea, Russia, and Iran—could exploit a Taiwan conflict to pursue their own aims while the United States is distracted. The 2023 war game by Cancian et al. points to a situation in which North Korea, either prodded by China or on its own volition, agitates on the Korean Peninsula. Especially with the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia could coordinate or independently expand aggression in Europe, leaving the United States to simultaneously address two new and volatile fronts.[25] Opportunities for horizontal escalation in a Taiwan conflict are numerous, from bilateral escalation between the United States and China to a sweeping global conflict involving many states and their interests.

In managing horizontal escalation—or the possibility for simultaneous vertical and horizontal escalation—the United States will need to invest in its defense industrial base to develop both greater force projection capabilities, to include shipbuilding and refueling tankers, and an industrial agility that can respond to a diversity of scenarios across the region. Additionally, Washington should not only invest in its own industrial base but also in joint capability development with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. The participation of allies would not only serve as a strategic advantage from the beginning of a conflict but could also prove extraordinarily valuable if the United States is dragged into a conflict elsewhere. Shrimpton cites AUKUS as a model of an agreement in which the United States and the United Kingdom share nuclear submarines and other advanced technologies with Australia. These robust regional partnerships could help weave a wide web of deterrence across the Pacific, so as Shrimpton writes, Xi Jinping would decide that "'today is not the day' to take on the United States and its allies in a military confrontation in the Indo-Pacific."

TEMPORAL ESCALATION: WINNING IN DAYS, MONTHS, OR YEARS

The third escalation vector that this study identifies is temporal. The time frame of a U.S.-China conflict could influence its intensity, scope, and ultimate outcome. Despite both China's and the United States' desires for a quick victory in any conflict, there is a significant possibility that neither side could rapidly achieve its objectives and that a war would become prolonged. Indeed, despite early predictions that Russia's victory in Ukraine would be prompt, the now nearly four-year war demonstrates how protraction should always be assumed, and that such a possibility requires a different set of management tools than an acute crisis.

War games highlight the importance of time in determining the shape and outcome of a U.S.-China conflict. A key finding of CSIS war games, for example, is that the United States would "need to join hostilities within days" to prevent a successful Chinese invasion of Taiwan.[26] Project Atom's authors similarly acknowledge the importance of speed from China's perspective. For example, Schake writes, "China has incentives to move fast and project a sense of automaticity as a way of heightening U.S. and allied anxiety. It benefits China to present a fait accompli if it can." Analysts have additionally raised the temporal vector in reference to the benefits of vertical escalation. Writing about a Taiwan scenario, former Joint Staff Deputy Director for Strategic Stability Greg Weaver assessed that "there is a temporal aspect to this deterrent effect. The vulnerability of the amphibious force is greatest when it is offloading forces and logistical support."[27] The CNAS war games have also pointed to the likelihood of a protracted conflict with no quick victory for either side.[28]

In the near term, the United States would likely face serious disadvantages in a protracted conflict as a result of munitions shortages and limited industrial capacity. War games and analyses highlight this weakness. For example, a key finding from CSIS war games is that "the United States would likely run out of some munitions—such as long-range, precision-guided munitions . . . in less than one week in a Taiwan Strait conflict."[29] Because U.S. industry takes approximately two years to build crucial advanced missiles, the United States would be unable to quickly replenish its arsenal. China's shipbuilding capacity would similarly put the United States at a disadvantage in a prolonged war. A 2024 CSIS analysis concluded that "China's massive shipbuilding industry would provide a strategic advantage in a war that stretches beyond a few weeks, allowing it to repair damaged vessels or construct replacements much faster than the United States."[30] These findings highlight key challenges with relying primarily or entirely on conventional forces to deter China, as Mount suggests. Indeed, China is aware of the weaknesses of the U.S. defense industrial base, especially in a drawn-out conflict. Citing conversations with Chinese military strategy specialists, Costlow posits that "Chinese leaders may perceive that a long, drawn-out war over Taiwan may favor China's defense industrial base compared to that of the United States."

RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE ROLE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN ESCALATION MANAGEMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Project Atom 2025 strategies point to four key areas for U.S. investment in an escalation management strategy vis-à-vis China; however, these are not necessarily points of consensus among all five authors. The first key area is the need to strengthen U.S. credibility and political

will for a protracted conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Most Project Atom authors describe U.S. stakes in the Indo-Pacific as very high, particularly in the case of Taiwan. Schake, for example, writes that a Chinese conquest of Taiwan "would collapse confidence in U.S. willingness to continue upholding the sovereignty of regional allies, requiring either a dramatic increase in the cost of reestablishing reassurance or much greater instability." Statements by Trump administration officials and U.S. foreign policy experts, however, illustrate a lack of consensus about Taiwan's importance. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby has described Taiwan as "a significant but not existential interest."[31] Other prominent commentators, including Jennifer Kavanaugh and Stephen Wertheim, argue that "the benefits of preserving Taiwan's de facto self-rule do not warrant the enormous human and economic costs of a U.S.-Chinese war."[32] Polling data suggest that the U.S. population holds similarly conflicted views.[33]

Enhancing the resiliency and agility of the industrial base will contribute toward the United States' credibility in both acute and protracted conflicts of the future.

In order to foster the public support needed to prevail in a prolonged conflict, however, the United States will need to convince its public of the importance of protecting Taiwan to promote U.S. regional and global credibility, and for the maintenance of a rules-based international order. Likely appeals to the public will also need to highlight Taiwan's democratic values and society. U.S.-led public awareness campaigns need not focus solely on the U.S. public but could also extend to allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. The Cancian et al. war game illustrated that Japanese willingness to allow the United States to use its bases in Japan and participate in any conflict would have a decisive influence on the outcome of a Taiwan conflict.[34] Without a unified understanding of the stakes in the Indo-Pacific, the United States may struggle to credibly signal resolve, particularly if U.S. lives are at risk. Furthermore, this awareness campaign would have the dual benefit of signaling U.S. and allied resolve to Chinese audiences before and during conflict.

The second essential part of the endeavor to increase U.S. credibility and prepare for a protracted conflict is investment in the defense industrial base. Enhancing the resiliency and agility of the industrial base will contribute toward U.S. credibility in both acute and protracted conflicts of the future. Analysts have proposed a multitude of policy proposals to this end. A shift to multiyear contracts for the procurement of key munitions would lead to greater investment in the production of those systems.[35] Intensified efforts to diversify supply chains would help to eliminate bottlenecks and reduce delays.[36] Cooperation with allies on the coproduction and maintenance of munitions, aircraft, and ships would help to boost production output and enable U.S. forces to stay in theater for longer.[37] Even if the United States implements these solutions today, however, it could take years to translate into expanded industrial capacity; for example, it can take 18–24 months or longer to implement investments in factories and production lines.[38]

Third, the United States will need to increase reliance on nuclear deterrence, at a minimum for the short term, to prevent a conflict in the Indo-Pacific and to manage escalation if one occurs. Mount's paper builds on the findings of the Strategic Posture Commission and others that point to the preference of relying on conventional weapons for deterrence. For the foreseeable future, however, relying on conventional deterrence alone—and/or relying on the existing nuclear deterrence posture—would present challenges for escalation management. One of the reasons why conventional deterrence would be a challenge, as outlined by Weaver in a separate analysis, is because the U.S. capabilities that would be most useful in a Taiwan scenario are in high demand elsewhere, including by European allies looking to bolster deterrence against Russia. Moreover, even in the long term, the absence of a strong *regional* nuclear capability in the Indo-Pacific could weaken the U.S. nuclear deterrent, as strategic nuclear weapons could lack credibility in a conventional conflict in the region.[39]

Finally, the United States needs to keep the door open for dialogue and develop off-ramps before a crisis emerges. Albertson urges the U.S. and Chinese policy communities to move beyond their current vague conceptualizations of "off-ramps" and to identify, select, and construct inflection points at which tensions could be alleviated. This critical activity requires creative thinking in peacetime that examines a potential conflict with an eye toward moments of potential change and, at those moments, to insert suggestions for de-escalation and negotiation. In full, Albertson disputes the idea that "off-ramps" simply exist and instead suggests that both parties must work to actively construct "off-ramps" that would likely look very different in varying conflicts. If China is willing, these discussions must begin today.

Conclusion

This report's recommendations point to an urgent need to accelerate and expand preparations for a conflict with China. Given Beijing's rapid conventional and nuclear buildups, time is of the essence. A strengthened defense industrial base would allow the United States to build the forces needed to deter and, if necessary, to manage escalation and, importantly, to prevail in a clash. More robust conventional forces—including deeper stockpiles of key munitions—would improve U.S. prospects in a protracted war, while additional theater-range nuclear capabilities would enable more calibrated deterrence signaling. A greater reliance on nuclear deterrence in the short term could strengthen deterrence while the United States works to bolster its conventional and nonstrategic nuclear capabilities. Continued attempts at diplomatic engagement could lay the foundation for communication during crises and conflicts. Perhaps most important, however, are efforts to communicate the stakes of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific to U.S. audiences as a means of strengthening credibility with allies and adversaries alike. Without the consent of the American people, future administrations would likely struggle to manage escalation during a clash and may choose to capitulate to Chinese aggression rather than engage in a war that their constituents do not support. By making a more compelling case about the potential impacts of Chinese aggression on U.S. security and prosperity, elected leaders can bolster the credibility of U.S. signaling, thereby enhancing both deterrence and the ability to manage escalation.

Off-Ramps as a Tool of U.S.-China Escalation Management

Mike Albertson[40]

Introduction

Across the competition spectrum, great power rivalry involves decisionmaking on where and when to take risks. Weighing risk versus reward is also integral to deciding whether to cooperate in the form of arrangements including arms control. As Donald Brennan wrote more than 60 years ago, the value in arms control lies in whether it "reduce[s] the hazards of the present armament policies by a factor greater than the amount of risk introduced by the control measures themselves."[41] In peacetime, states can assume the risks inherent in cooperating with an adversary to attempt to mitigate risks likely to arise in competition, crisis, or conflict. Alternatively, states can choose to forgo peacetime cooperation and assume risks later, complicating their abilities to manage crises, war, and war termination.

China seems to think that it can downplay the risks of misperception, inadvertent escalation, and arms races, instead choosing to prioritize the development of military capabilities.[42] Beijing believes that it does not need to accept risk in peacetime by cooperating in any meaningful way, concluding that it can execute its desired theory of victory (ToV) risk-free. At the same time, China believes that it can successfully manipulate risks in the minds of the United States and U.S. allies in its effort to change the status quo. In short, China calculates that it can have its cake and eat it too, even having ice cream on the side.

As China doubles down on its military buildup, the United States and its allies will likely continue in their strategy of denying China its objectives.

The reality is likely different. As China doubles down on its military buildup, the United States and its allies will likely continue in their strategy of denying China its objectives. Given these countervailing trends, a quick and smooth victory on either side appears unlikely, presenting interesting questions of how stakes and objectives will transform if the status quo changes in more limited ways. Examples include a protracted war with no clear winner and loser or China achieving only limited goals (such as seizing Taiwanese-controlled islands but not Taiwan itself) but not complete victory. In such situations, war termination will require limited cooperative measures in the midst of crisis or conflict, specifically at inflection points when stalemate and reality have sobered policymakers and military officials to the realities of less-than-total victory.

In the current environment of peacetime competition, the challenge is convincing Chinese interlocutors that there will be risks that must be managed, or at least cooperatively reduced. This will entail imparting lessons that escalation management is likely to be messy, conflict is likely to be costly, war is likely to lack a clear winner, maximalist aims will need to be revised downward, and a new temporary or longer-term status quo will need to be agreed upon *in media res*. In sum, mutually acceptable off-ramps are likely to be needed. Starting at the end of the problem set—with the likely need for off-ramps and war termination—and then working backward is a potentially useful approach to addressing this issue. To that purpose, Beijing must be presented with risks in the form of outcomes unacceptable and unthinkable to its current assessment of a risk-free risk management strategy.

This chapter addresses the issues surrounding the lack of cooperative progress on escalation management with China. It proposes a three-fold pathway that could yield some new thinking in how the United States sees "off-ramps" in this context. The first step is a focus on U.S.-China scenarios short of total victory, which are both likely and could form "change points" where ad hoc measures are needed. The second step would be a significant revision in how the United States thinks about off-ramps as a possible substitute organizing concept for loaded terms like "arms control" and "risk reduction." The third and final step is an attempt to identify and explore potentially useable future off-ramps through looking more closely at factors of identification, selection, construction, communication, and agency.

Diagnosing the Problem

The primary research question posed by Project Atom—What tools and approaches can the United States use to "manage" escalation risks with China in the Indo-Pacific across a range of scenarios to include acute incidents at sea, Chinese threats on Taiwan, and other contingencies? —boils down to fundamental questions of whether escalation risks can be (1) identified (either in advance or in the moment) and (2) managed successfully (likely in a cooperative manner) toward a mutually

acceptable outcome. Both are hard questions, and identification and management of risks remain hot topics in the policy and expert communities.

Questions surrounding identification have proven more straightforward. Potential problem areas including entanglement and miscommunication are well studied.[43] Scholars have proposed numerous ideas on cooperative risk management, largely based on legacy U.S.-Soviet/Russian risk-reduction concepts: crisis communication mechanisms, hotlines, mutual signaling frameworks, transparency and confidence-building measures, strategic stability dialogues, launch notifications, air and sea incident mechanisms, de-targeting, noninterference with national technical means, and track 1, 1.5, and 2 dialogues, to name a few.[44]

Escalation management—under the terminological mantle of arms control, risk reduction, denuclearization, or off-ramps—has proven difficult. Beijing and Moscow have not been willing partners. Many U.S. proposals have been pursued with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in official and nonofficial venues by both Democratic and Republican administration officials, and by nongovernmental experts. Only a few proposals have gained traction, albeit limited, despite U.S. officials and expert interlocutors pursuing them with substantial time and energy.[45] Similarly, numerous cooperative efforts with Russia have been made over the past two-plus decades to shore up the eroding arms control landscape with something other than legally binding agreements. Even the search for low-hanging fruit has been hard, with Russia failing to engage on any substantive risk-reduction agenda. When zooming out and taking a broader conception of risk reduction to include unilateral measures and perceived unilateral or allied restraint, the results still seem inadequate compared to the decades-plus erosion of cooperation, the existing problems, and the assessed risks.

Why has this been the case with both China and Russia, and why should the United States believe that a new approach to engagement-based or unilateral risk reduction vis-à-vis China could be more successful going forward? This paper begins with an initial diagnosis as to where the United States and China converge and diverge in their thinking on several core issues at the heart of escalation management.

- **Differences in the Perceived Value of Running Risks:** The central difference is the perceived value of risks and escalation between the United States and its allies and their adversaries (specifically, China)—that is, between status quo and revisionist powers. Status quo powers perceive risk and escalation as undesirable, creating dangers both anticipated and unforeseen as well as spirals and vortexes that escape control and lead to catastrophic consequences.[46] Thus, for status quo powers, any escalation initiated by a challenger must be "controlled" or "managed" in some logical way toward a return to the favorable status quo *ante bellum*, or toward a new status quo at least as favorable.[47] Conversely, revisionist powers want to change the status quo, and therefore utilize a strategy that assumes risks and dangers in pursuit of that geopolitical end. In such strategies U.S. adversaries place running risks and escalating dangers to change the status quo at the center of their personalist styles and geopolitical strategies. As Alexander George and Richard Smoke observed, "Nations interested in changing the status quo normally have more than one option for doing so."[48] The choice between pursuit of these various options revolves around calculating risk. The

arc of the Cold War competition between the United States and Soviet Union, and thus the windows of success for arms control and risk-reduction efforts, centered on perceptions of the status quo.

- **Similarities in Analytic Methods of Approaching Risks:** Given the importance of understanding nuclear risks—either in avoiding them or manipulating them for potential advantage—attempting to quantify the problems plays a central role.[49] The underlying assumption is that if risks can be identified, measured, and thus understood, they can be managed or leveraged either in defense of the status quo or in its revision. This analytic product has both ready producers and steady consumers. Military scientists and quantitative-focused experts gravitate toward this policy demand signal—complexity can be made simple, metrics can be created, unknowns can be anticipated, actions can be calibrated and controlled, tensions can be managed up or down, and messy conflicts can be fought and won. Policymakers and senior military leadership seek clarity during the persistent informational fog of crisis and conflict. The belief in analytical clarity allows both sides to develop potential ToVs in the conflict.
- **Similarities in Setting the Stakes High:** Looking specifically at U.S.-China competition over Taiwan, both sides have defined the conflict as nearly absolute in terms of stakes and objectives. Given the severe consequences for failure in such an absolute understanding, there is little incentive in peacetime to trust, engage, or bargain with the devil. In fact, with such black-and-white stakes for both sides, each views it as essential to get any cooperative risk reduction unequivocally correct (and in their respective favors) because failing to do so could limit their respective ability to prevail in a high-stakes competition.
- **Similarities in Assessing Recent Conflicts:** Both China and the United States have observed the Russia-Ukraine war and considered how lessons learned from it translate to a future China-Taiwan scenario.[50] Decades of extensive Russian military science theory about intricate escalation management, distinct phases of conflict, calibrated damage dosage, information dominance, and noncontact warfare were largely ignored when the political decision to invade Ukraine was made and military operations ran into battlefield problems. Open questions remain on whether this war could have been a successful example of escalation management, what can be applied to U.S.-China-Taiwan relations, and whether modern technology can overcome battlefield factors such as fog or friction.

The Sticking Point

Where does this leave the analysis in terms of a diagnosis? Both China and the United States likely see risk and escalation as "manageable." To admit otherwise would invite undesirable policy prospects—either backing down in the face of aggression over fears of uncontrollable escalation or maintaining the detested status quo. The key sticking point to substantive cooperative progress lies in the two sides' disparate views on the allure and desirability of risks and escalation. The United States seeks to reduce risks that could emerge from attempts to change the status quo, while China wants its adversaries to feel uncertainties and risks. Given this fundamental difference,

multiple mechanisms and preestablished options designed to reduce risk, as least as they have been marketed so far, are unlikely to exist in any future U.S.-China crisis over Taiwan.

Yet should China initiate a conflict over Taiwan, some degree of risk-reduction measures will be needed. Given how the crisis and conflict would likely unfold in terms of the expected dynamics of war initiation, intra-war deterrence, and war termination, the need to employ these measures would be inevitable. As John G. Stoessinger noted in *Why Nations Go to War*,

> On the eve of each war, at least one nation misperceives another's power. In that sense, the beginning of each war is a perception or an accident. The war itself then slowly, and in agony, teaches men about reality. And peace is made when reality has won. The outbreak of war and the coming of peace are separated by a road that leads from misperception to reality.[51]

This pathway of initial expectations giving way to realities is echoed by Geoffrey Blainey:

> The start of war is—almost by the definition of warfare—marked by conflicting expectations of what that war will be like. War itself then provides the stinging ice of reality. And at the end of the war those rival expectations, initially so far apart, are so close to one another that terms of peace can be agreed upon.[52]

It is at this point of Blainey's "the stinging ice of reality" where risk-reduction measures will be needed and should be considered. This would be the moment in which misperceptions about stakes and capabilities will be corrected, where escalation will be difficult, if not impossible, to "manage" completely, where military options will become more expensive or otherwise costly, where domestic and policy divisions will emerge, and where limited objectives may be attained but total victory will remain distant. These are the change points identified by Richard Neustadt and Ernest May in *Thinking in Time*, the "relatively fixed and limited periods along an issue's timeline" where the trajectory of those issues can be affected.[53] Change points represent windows of cooperative opportunity, however brief. Yet the question becomes, in the heat of war and as emotions run high, how can one side convince the other to move toward arms control or risk reduction when such cooperation was not possible in peacetime?

Assessing Key Issue Areas in Escalation Management

This chapter, like the others in Project Atom, uses the following four key issue areas as a framework for assessment: (1) U.S. and allies' strategic objectives in the event of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific; (2) risks of escalation in the Indo-Pacific; (3) military tools for escalation management; and (4) the role of off-ramps, arms control, and nonmilitary risk-reduction tools in escalation management.

U.S. AND ALLIES' STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES IN THE EVENT OF A CRISIS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

In terms of U.S. and allied strategic objectives, the key challenge lies in differentiating stakes from objectives. The two should be mutually reinforcing—stakes should shape objectives, and vice versa. Oftentimes, however, stakes and objectives become confused, synonymous, or unbalanced.

Discussions on the stakes regarding Taiwan have been largely cast as quasi-existential in the United States. This framing is not surprising, as, for example, China hawks attempt to draw attention and resources to the specific challenge, and past and present U.S. administrations try to signal to their interlocutors in Beijing that they consider the stakes high and that there is not an asymmetry of stakes waiting to be tested and exploited by China. In such an all-or-nothing understanding, the "loss" of Taiwan is framed as a significant regional setback in the Asia-Pacific, a major blow to the United States as the perceived preeminent global power, and a further deterioration of the rules-based international order. U.S. regional allies including Japan, South Korea, and Australia see the loss of Taiwan as presaging a weakened regional U.S. presence and future bullying by Beijing, forcing them to choose between accommodation or coercion, with little wiggle room in between.

Chinese leaders have also characterized the Taiwan issue in existential terms. China has placed Taiwan at the center of its strategic objective to remake the Indo-Pacific and redress a century of humiliation.[54] A failed attempt to seize Taiwan is a potential prelude to the end of the Xi regime or even the potential fall of the Chinese Communist Party.

With the stakes couched in existential terms, the objectives for both sides—full unification with Taiwan versus U.S.-denied control of Taiwan by China—become absolute in nature. In this worldview, China will attempt to take Taiwan, and the United States and its allies will attempt to deny it. The resulting objectives require one of two black-and-white outcomes:

1. China wins and attains the dominant position in the region. The United States loses, accepts defeat, and withdraws gracefully from the region; or
2. China loses decisively or fails to even try to take Taiwan. The status quo holds, China remains ununified, and the United States remains the number one global power.

However, do these existential stakes, the maximalist objectives that derive from them, and the pathways in which the conflict would unfold constitute the full picture? A brief look at broader U.S. objectives in the Indo-Pacific reveals that there are numerous, albeit more limited, goals for U.S. involvement in the region that have significant nonmilitary elements, or that go beyond a U.S.-China confrontation over control of Taiwan. For example:

- protecting and preserving the self-governing status of Taiwan;
- assuring U.S. allies in the region that the United States is committed to the defense of their security and the regional order;
- conveying allied strength and resolve to China beyond the issue of Taiwan;
- avoiding where possible potential escalation pathways via Chinese gray zone attacks against U.S. and allied forces in the region, as well as the U.S. homeland, or U.S. gray zone attacks against mainland China;
- maintaining U.S. operational effectiveness in the space and cyber domains;
- deterring opportunistic aggression by North Korea on the Korean Peninsula and Russia in the European theater; and
- setting the conditions for durable and lasting peace should conflict occur.

The more the Chinese military expands and the United States and its allies make countermoves to bolster conventional denial capabilities, the less likely a quick and complete victory on either side would be. There are interesting questions as to what the stakes and objectives will become if the status quo changes in more limited ways—for example, if there is a protracted war without a clear trending winner and loser, or if China achieves limited goals (such as seizing Taiwanese-controlled islands but not Taiwan itself) but not complete victory. As seen in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in various India-Pakistan crises, and in China-Taiwan war games and tabletop exercises, harder problems such as questions of nuclear use arise in these messy intra-war deterrence scenarios—when initial assessments are faulty, realities prove complicated, escalation cannot be carefully dialed up and down, termination is challenging, and the crisis or conflict is prolonged.[55]

Deterrence, if it is to be "restored," needs to be done at some new, mutually agreed upon point, likely with some degree of reciprocal action grounded in trust. This will be incredibly difficult after a costly and damaging conflict.

These are scenarios where deterrence has failed though aggression has not succeeded, where the status quo has changed but lethality has run into its natural limits of what it can achieve. A successful resolution requires mutual accommodation around recalibrated stakes and objectives. One cannot simply return to the status quo *ante bellum*. Deterrence, if it is to be "restored," needs to be done at some new, mutually agreed upon point, likely with some degree of reciprocal action grounded in trust. This will be incredibly difficult after a costly and damaging conflict where mutual trust has been destroyed and there are few existing guardrails or communication channels in place.

RISKS OF ESCALATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The second key area for analysis centers on escalation risks. As many of the other authors in this volume note, escalation in the Indo-Pacific could take many forms. It could be automatic or voluntary, symmetric or asymmetric, linear or circular, fast or slow. In all likelihood, escalation will comprise some formulation of these at different points on the conflict spectrum. This places enormous burdens on policymakers and analysts to identify and manage risks.

A quick tally of anticipated crisis or conflict scenarios, and their potential resultant escalation pathways, provides a case in point. U.S.-China scenarios generally fall into three camps: China initiates (either purposefully or inadvertently); the United States initiates (either purposefully or inadvertently); or an external catalyst initiates a crisis or conflict (either purposefully or inadvertently). How the scenario starts has important implications for which side believes itself to be more prepared for hostilities (at least in the initial stages), and for situations in which neither side is fully prepared for conflict. In examining the literature, there are a myriad of potential scenarios on how a U.S.-China crisis or conflict could unfold, each with their own distinct downstream implications for escalation management:

- The “Davidson Window” is fulfilled: China moves on its anticipated timeline against Taiwan, before 2027.
- A Hainan Island Incident redux: A military incident cascades into open confrontation on no one’s intended timeline.
- China misreads the stakes: Chinese leadership misreads or misinterprets U.S. stakes or U.S. willingness to intervene and initiates hostilities. The United States then does intervene.
- Opportunistic aggression elsewhere: A major U.S. military operation in another theater, or elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific, encourages Chinese leadership to seize a potential window of opportunity.
- The “axis of authoritarians”: China moves against Taiwan in coordination with Russia, and potentially others in other theaters, to distract and divide U.S. and allied responses.
- Taiwan declares independence: A partner or ally action beyond U.S. control spurs Chinese leadership to initiate hostilities.
- *Red Storm Rising*: An internal shock (e.g., economic instability, leadership illness, or energy shortages) forces Chinese leadership to initiate hostilities.[56]
- A trade war becomes a hot war: Following a slow bubble over time driven by peacetime competition, one side feels the pressure to ratchet up the stakes.
- U.S. denial strategy is too successful: U.S. denial-strategy actions push China to initiate hostilities on the assumption that the longer it delays the worse its assessed chances will be.

Escalation risks are further heightened by other factors. China will be operating in a complex battlespace with sophisticated but unproven forces and capabilities. Among the great powers, military capabilities are largely untested in conflict against modern systems fielded by the other side. While the military implications of the Russia-Ukraine protracted land war have been studied, their applications in a Taiwanese air- or sea-focused scenario remain unclear.

There is also much that is unknown about how China would fight a war to achieve its desired ToV. China has a variety of ToV paths available as it pursues a change to the status quo regarding Taiwan, with examples in the literature including (1) a longer-term coercion strategy to achieve objectives without fighting, (2) a large-scale maritime invasion across the straits, (3) an asymmetric “assassin’s mace” strategy in multiple domains early, (4) a broader regional conventional action under the nuclear shadow of its strong regional and strategic forces to achieve a more Clausewitzian total victory, (5) a slower blockade or “anaconda” pressure strategy, (6) a smaller-scale fait accompli against Taiwanese offshore islands to test U.S. resolve to intervene, and so on.[57]

All of this uncertainty—from how a crisis will begin to how a conflict will unfold, and everything in between, including how China will choose to fight a war and how well China will perform—should give pause to the idea that escalation risks can be completely calculated or removed in advance. As a recent RAND report noted, “Escalatory risk is a nonlinear, perceptual, and subjective issue that cannot be reduced to a single number.”[58]

MILITARY TOOLS FOR ESCALATION MANAGEMENT

The third key area for analysis involves military tools for escalation management. Given the uncertainties discussed above, deterring Chinese initiation of a conflict remains the most effective U.S. tool for escalation management. Should deterrence fail, the U.S. military approach is fairly clear: The United States will likely be on the defensive, reacting to Chinese first moves to deny China its objectives. In this scenario, the United States' goals are more limited. Given this approach, U.S. military tools ideally would inflict more human casualties on the adversary than they would put U.S. personnel at risk. The tools would provide options for both symmetrical and asymmetrical responses at every rung on the escalation ladder and in various warfighting domains, and would be cost-effective. Favorable ratios in these areas would enhance defense dominance, would allow for the ability to blunt initial attempts at a Chinese fait accompli, and would wear down adversary offensive assets quickly and cheaply.

As the status quo protector, the United States' escalation management strategy would need to rely on greater transparency to clearly and openly show U.S. and allied capabilities and resolve.

Thus, as the status quo protector, the United States' escalation management strategy would need to rely on greater transparency to clearly and openly show U.S. and allied capabilities and resolve. These capabilities would be communicated through unambiguous signals sent with military forces such as exercises and deployments, through displays of technological superiority via test beds and demonstrations, and through clear public messaging indicating allied cohesion and military effectiveness.

As much as possible given fiscal and industrial restraints, the United States and its allies must build a portfolio of capabilities to address anticipated risk areas across the deterrence spectrum.[59] U.S. and allied deterrence advocates seek to undermine PRC belief in its own conventional regional force advantage through the pursuit of cheap, unmanned, conventional lethality strategies that shift the advantage to the defense—i.e., to the United States and its allies—and wear down the key personnel and military assets China would need to commit to achieve its desired ToV.

Broad-based capabilities offer the United States and its allies cost-effective escalation management options. For example, interconnected regional missile defense systems would make PRC attempts at coercive missile strikes more costly and complicated to successfully execute. Expanded U.S. homeland missile defenses would raise doubts in China that the United States can be threatened or attacked easily. In addition, a cost-effective and expanded conventional deep-precision strike arsenal would change Chinese perceptions of China's interior being a sanctuary in which to base critical strategic capabilities. Moreover, additional nuclear capabilities in the region, like deployable dual-capable aircraft or nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles, would demonstrate to Beijing

that limited nuclear strikes are not a viable pathway to achieving its ToV. Finally, burden sharing with allies would be leveraged to create the impression of a more impressive whole.

Ideally, any capabilities would have additional attributes: extending or shortening decision space to U.S. and allied advantage; allowing more time to flow other U.S. assets into the region; enhancing survivability; providing a more complete spectrum of options; better integrating conventional, nuclear, and non-kinetic capabilities; and creating advantages for the United States and disadvantages for China. This portfolio and attribute set would theoretically deny in a crisis, or defeat in a conflict, China's best attempts to change the status quo, forcing Beijing to reassess its stakes and objectives and back down.

While the required capabilities are relatively clear, the U.S. and allied military strategy for escalation management would be far less so should China choose to initiate a crisis or conflict. Military and political science often operate around the assumption that escalation risks can be understood, identified, calculated, and managed through rational actor models, game theory, case studies, and quantitative analysis. This underlying assumption is especially prevalent in the Russian military science approach to escalation management.[60] Chinese military science writing on escalation management is particularly problematic given China's inexperience with both nuclear crises and major conventional conflict.[61] This disconnect means that U.S. and allied strategies must be prepared to pivot and, once initial Chinese aggression is checked, to steer the conflict toward a new status quo that is both acceptable to China and also advantageous to the United States and its allies.

The Role of Arms Control, Off-Ramps, and Risk Reduction in Escalation Management

The last area to be explored encompasses the potential roles of off-ramps, arms control, and other risk-reduction tools for escalation management in a scenario centering on the United States, China, and Taiwan. As noted above, the dilemma centers on how escalation management measures can be available in moments of crisis and conflict, when they are most necessary, if such measures cannot be agreed upon and preestablished in peacetime, when it theoretically would be easier but less pressing to do so. Is there a potential for creating such measures while in crisis or conflict, presumably at inflection points when policymakers and military officials have become sobered by the stalemates and realities of war? Or must any escalation management tools be built in advance of conflict to be successful?

ARMS CONTROL

At first glance, with its aims of reducing the likelihood of war and the damage of war should it occur, arms control remains appealing. Traditional arms control has been achieved through setting numerical limitations for certain types of weapons or through creating normative behaviors regarding the use of weapons in a conflict, as seen in agreements such as the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) between the United States and Russia, and the widely accepted Chemical Weapons Convention, respectively.[62] There is, however, little meaningful arms control between the United States and China aimed at limiting either power's military capabilities or

behaviors. While unfortunate, this is not surprising, as neither side wants to limit its own emerging capabilities or take potential actions off the table. Moreover, neither side wants to increase confidence or reduce risks for the other side. Finally, and particularly given the variety of pathways, neither side wants to assume potential risk in trading away something of known assessed value; neither side trusts the other to hold to their peacetime commitments in a later high-stakes situation.

This is not to say that future arms control with China is impossible, or that arms control needs to be significantly reimagined as something wholly different than the legally binding treaties of the past. But any escalation management role for arms control likely must wait until a future point at which both the United States and China grow more comfortable with their capabilities vis-à-vis one another and more certain as to what will be needed and unneeded (and thus bargained over and potentially away without significant military risk). At the very least, both need to be more comfortable with a mutually agreed upon status quo.

OFF-RAMPS

To understand the potential role for off-ramps in escalation management, there must first be a deeper exploration of crisis and conflict scenarios, including how they might unfold and the possible challenges they pose to desired U.S. and adversary theories of victory. This has already begun with recent analyses of potential U.S.-China crises and conflicts beyond cross-strait invasion scenarios to incorporate challenges such as asymmetric attacks, maritime blockades, limited land grabs, and political or economic coercion.[63] Such work must continue, as the more pathways that can be explored and considered in advance, the better.

In particular, scenarios in which strategies become bogged down and players grow frustrated deserve further investigation. Given the frequent scarcity of money, sponsor interest, and human participation, exercises typically are driven to escalate in order to cover more hard problems in a scenario. These exercises do not bog down, instead simply ending when the exercise reaches its aimed-for conclusion or the participants run out of time. Less often explored is when participants on both sides get "stuck"—for example, when they must endure multiple rounds of tit-for-tat with no decision outcome in place, when they face growing domestic pressures to end or win the war, or when they begin to see that only limited aims are achievable. While these are unsatisfying results for a game designer or participant, they potentially reflect the realities of how crises and conflicts unfold.

Through studying scenarios with moments of frustrated "equilibrium" or "salience," to use the terms of Thomas Schelling and Richard Smoke, respectively, analysts will be able to pre-identify potential change points.[64] These points capture an important human dimension of conflict and crisis: When participants attempt to reconfigure the dynamics of an unfolding crisis or conflict, when military operations go off autopilot, political leadership is reasserted, and factors such as emotions come into the equations and realities of conflict.

These critical moments offer a variety of dimensions for study: time, action, and interaction, to name a few. For example, how long do we expect these saliences to last? How do people attempt to unstick these situations? How do the parties collaborate and signal one another? These scenarios

also test the value of preestablished measures. Will strong counterpart–even military-to-military–ties emerge and be used in a crisis or conflict? How will back-channel interlocutors communicate changing stakes and objectives?

Writing in the early 1980s, when détente had collapsed and the prospects for future U.S.-Soviet arms control seemed dim, Alexander George argued that "when norms and rules of engagement do not exist to regulate superpower involvement in a contested area, the task becomes one of improvising an ad hoc set of ground rules for managing that particular competition."[65] Managing the competition then becomes largely about limiting: limiting escalatory potential, limiting objectives to be achieved in a particular conflict, and limiting the means employed to achieve that objective. The willingness to self-limit, and to communicate this to the other side, becomes a challenge of intra-war bargaining, as has been displayed over the last several years in the Russia-Ukraine war.[66]

Off-Ramps as Tools of Escalation, De-Escalation, and Termination

One of the most overused terms in the deterrence lexicon, "off-ramp" implies a clarity and ease of use which is rarely found in moments of crisis or conflict. Moreover, and often frustratingly, off-ramps when presented are often unappealing to the aggressor and therefore are untaken, thus appearing frustrating and escalatory to their constructor. Why is this the case?

The Misleading Visualization of Off-Ramps

The term "off-ramps" triggers images of clear road signs and pathways, yet the complex realities of crises and conflicts do not conform to the image of the preconstructed clarity and preplanned simplicity of a road trip. They are instead missed or lay half-finished. "Why didn't they stop? It was perfectly obvious where the off-ramp was!" So-called off-ramps then take on a negative connotation, seen as unhelpful appeasement short of desired military outcomes. They become counterproductive, spurring further military action instead of the desired peace.

Thinking More Deeply About Off-Ramps

Off-ramps must be reconceptualized to be of use in escalation management. Similar to how a driver, for a myriad of reasons, can change a car's route, escalation is not inevitable in moments of crisis. Moreover, escalation does not move in a single direction, or at a steady pace, nor does it grow necessarily more rapidly as the crisis or conflict unfolds. Escalation can be better viewed as a trip by a driver undertaken with a particular destination in mind, but one which likely has pauses and turns–planned and unplanned–over the course of the journey. For these pauses to become meaningful off-ramps as understood in escalation management, analytic work needs to be done involving identification, selection, construction, signage, and agency.

Identification is the first step. Structured analytic techniques used for exploring challenges of escalation across the spectrum–war games, tabletop exercises, scenario-based discussions–seldom allow for pauses. The techniques are driven toward a particular end, centered on a specific research question, or focused on a defined hypothesis. Where such analyses are lacking is in finding change points and focusing on them. Players say, "shouldn't we be thinking of off-ramps?" as they are shunted along to the next move in the exercise. Finding and circling change points for further analysis would be useful. Though emerging technology tools can play some role here, ultimately

these are humans making decisions. Artificial intelligence can map out a perfect car trip, but it cannot account for the personal whims of the driver or the passengers once the trip is underway.

Not all change points will ultimately be off-ramps. The point immediately after one side has chosen to dramatically escalate, in terms of weapons, targets, participants, and geographical boundaries, for example, is perhaps not ripe for an off-ramp. The initiator may see every incentive to push forward and exploit their advantage. The consideration of off-ramps here by the recipient, rather than reciprocal action to correct misperceptions of will and stakes in the conflict, may be dismissed as capitulation or acceptance of the adversary's attempt to terminate conflict on favorable terms. These are the kinds of exercise discussions that give off-ramps a whiff of surrender and diminish their perceived utility as viable tools of escalation management.

Therefore, some selection process in scenarios featuring the United States and China is a necessary second step. Selection might reveal that off-ramps would be useful at points where, to name a few: neither side can gain a perceived advantage, several rounds of tit-for-tat strikes have gained either side little, the aggressor is starting to see the flaws in their initial assumptions, nuclear use is threatened but unlikely to change the conventional battlefield, or domestic support for a continuation of the conflict is waning on both sides. Exercises that feature these kinds of dynamics at defined moments may allow for better exploration of whether off-ramps at these potential stages would have better odds of success.

Third, attempts must be made to pre-experience and preconstruct off-ramps that are assessed to be more important or more likely to occur. Most of these efforts will involve bargaining or communication mechanisms to convey messaging and suggest alternatives. This might be done in peacetime by senior policymakers, by military officials during an accident or crisis, or by back-channel interlocutors in moments of tension. With this reconception, many of the legacy mechanisms mentioned earlier—crisis communication mechanisms, hotlines, mutual signaling frameworks, strategic stability dialogues, air or sea incident mechanisms—become off-ramps. But taking an off-ramp implies there are corresponding desires from both parties—one to construct or highlight the off-ramp, the other to pull off the road either temporarily or for good. If there is not mutual desire for the end offered by an off-ramp, then the discussion is not of off-ramps, but rather roadblocks, which centers on coercion rather than communication and influence.

Fourth, preconstruction of off-ramps involves thinking hard about signage. How to communicate the existence of off-ramps in the midst of a crisis or conflict is a difficult problem that warrants attention when analyzing change points and construction. Existing track 1.5 (semiofficial) and track 2 (nonofficial) diplomatic channels could be leveraged when considering the signaling of off-ramps, though this would require further analysis and possible expansion.

Finally, there is the question of agency. Why do people decide to take off-ramps? The answer likely lies in their seeing greater value in taking an off-ramp than in proceeding down the road. Yet, this may not be a simple calculation; it may be an independent decision, or one shepherded or compelled by an adversary. Academic and think tank work would be useful in providing more historical analyses of off-ramps, answering questions such as the following: When did they succeed

and fail? Why? How and when were off-ramps constructed? How were they communicated and perceived by the players? Answers to these questions and more would help the discussion go beyond the standard Cuban Missile Crisis analogies of two sides working together behind the scenes to get out of a problem.

THE NEED FOR UNCOMFORTABLE SHARED EXPERIENCES IN PEACETIME

While conversations and historical examples are useful, experiential processes hold the most potential for progress simply because of their power to force players to experience the challenge firsthand in an immersive environment. But this requires an increased focus in structural analytic games on less glamorous problems: players getting stuck for multiple rounds of unfruitful tit-for-tat; building meaningful and time-consuming communication mechanisms into games; not forcing escalation; exploring uncomfortable scenarios involving multiple rounds of limited nuclear use; and not allowing players to push the cyber button when faced with a lack of real options of what to do next.

Both U.S. and Chinese players must experience these situations for themselves and draw conclusions about whether their preexisting beliefs about stakes, capabilities, and capacities to successfully manage escalation are valid. This approach has already proven to have some utility in India-Pakistan-related exercises.[67] This paper suggests that explorations of where the two sides get stuck or get bogged down, and thus where to think about conceiving or preconstructing off-ramps, could be more valuable than exercises that examine who wins or loses based on estimates of capabilities and operations.

How does this help the United States and China reach concrete solutions regarding the challenges posed by escalation management? At present, there is a serious disconnect between the two powers. The United States has persisted in having a conversation about the dangers of escalation management with a China that feels comfortable in its ability to manage escalation. The same is true for the term "risk reduction," with the United States attempting to reduce risks that the PRC side sees value in creating and promoting. Putting aside the theoretical discussion of whether escalation can be managed or risks need to be reduced, some mutual recognition and agreement on pathways and problem sets—including on how things could unfold, where things might get messy, and where new ad hoc rules might need to be created—would allow the two sides to think about areas where some degree of communication and cooperation might be useful. This thinking will be aided by some degree of identification, selection, preconstruction, and signaling of off-ramps to demonstrate the potential mutual benefits in thinking about the need for building and utilizing ad hoc arrangements. If discussions on these ad hoc rules of the road gain traction, they could serve as the basis for additional measures that could be agreed upon in peacetime.

It Could Always Get Worse

Managing Escalation Risks with China

Matthew R. Costlow[68]

Introduction

Both the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are approaching a pivotal point in the history of their relations: Will there be conflict between the two states or can their actions–jointly or unilaterally–forestall conflict until political conditions improve? Chinese leaders have promised their people a return to national glory out of the "century of humiliation," culminating in the incorporation of Taiwan into the mainland, forcefully if necessary. The United States has managed its partnership with Taiwan carefully to avoid unintentionally provoking a PRC military response, but it is opposed to any forceful takeover of Taiwan, if for no other reason than the profoundly destabilizing effect a conflict would have on Asia, and even globally. Despite consistent U.S. efforts to engage in dialogue with PRC officials on a host of strategic issues, Beijing has shown itself to be just as consistent in dismissing calls for increased communication. In the absence of a willing partner in dialogue, the United States is forced to consider how it can best defend its national interests, allies, and partners in the Indo-Pacific while demonstrating to China that it has more to gain through cooperation than competition.

How, then, should the United States approach relations with China in ways that are consistent with defending U.S., allied, and partner national interests while also lowering the risk of escalation and conflict with China? If the ultimate goal is to influence China's decision calculus toward refraining from aggression, increasing dialogue, and exploring further risk-reduction measures, then the United States should communicate three reinforcing messages: (1) the United States has vital national interests at stake in the Indo-Pacific that are threatened by potential PRC aggression, (2)

the United States will continuously adapt its conventional and nuclear capabilities to defeat PRC aggression and defend U.S. allies and partners, and (3) there are fewer risks and more rewards for Beijing to shift its political goals away from competition and toward greater cooperation, or, at the very least, to delay any aggressive action.

If the United States and its allies and partners can successfully navigate deterring or managing a Taiwan conflict or crisis, then they will most likely have the capabilities and approaches needed to reduce risk in other scenarios.

Because Taiwan stands as the most significant potential flashpoint between the United States and China, this chapter will focus on that scenario for the purposes of discussing escalation management and risk reduction. If the United States and its allies and partners can successfully navigate deterring or managing a Taiwan conflict or crisis, then they will most likely have the capabilities and approaches needed to reduce risk in other scenarios—the lesser included cases. This chapter proceeds by examining U.S. stakes, capabilities, and cooperative measures in turn.

U.S. and Allied Stakes During an Indo-Pacific Crisis or Conflict

There are two foundational questions for U.S. and allied leaders to consider as they formulate their policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific: What are the stakes at risk and what are the acceptable costs? These questions are of course inextricably linked. As the scholar Colin Gray stated succinctly, "Strategic analysis never loses sight of the logical truth that means make sense only with respect to ends. Ends, or goals, are not all that matter, because the cost of reaching them can be so high that they are not worth securing."[69] If U.S. stakes in a crisis or conflict are defined as the relative damage or benefit to U.S. national interests that may result from the outcome, then the stakes could range from significant to vital, depending on the nature of the event and the perceptions of U.S. leaders.

Given the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression and the increasing cooperation between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, the impact of U.S. actions (and inactions) in the Indo-Pacific will be multiplied well beyond the region.[70] That is to say, the United States has a finite set of military resources and a multiplicity of political commitments, and faces the ever-present twin dangers of (1) pooling so many military forces in one area that it causes opportunistic aggression in the less well-defended regions and (2) of spreading its forces so thinly across the world that it cannot respond effectively to a regional fait accompli. Add in nuclear weapons and the associated risk of escalation and it becomes clear that even a relatively restrained conflict in the Indo-Pacific, at least in its beginning stages, could easily pose global risks to vital U.S. national interests. If an adversary is successful in defeating a U.S. ally, the effects could extend to other U.S. allies who may then seek alternative forms of security, be that potentially acquiescing to the regional hegemon or pursuing

their own nuclear arsenals. Moreover, a regional conflict could potentially escalate to threaten the U.S. homeland itself. These are merely some of the potential U.S. stakes in a crisis or conflict.

What, then, of the costs that the United States is willing to endure to achieve its goals? This is an enduring, if not popular, strategic question, and one that relates directly to deterrence. As Secretary of Defense Harold Brown noted during the Cold War:

> Deterrence is usually seen as the product of several conditions. We must obviously be able to communicate a message to the other side about the price it will have to pay for attempting to achieve an objective unacceptable to us. We must have the military capabilities necessary to exact the payment (at a cost acceptable to ourselves), whether by denying our opponent his objectives, by charging him an excessive price for achieving them, or by some combination of the two. We must have the plans and the readiness necessary to demonstrate that we can deliver on our "message." We must be sure there is no way for the opponent to eliminate our deterrent capability. At the same time, our deterrent message must have some degree of credibility. That is to say, both we and our opponent must believe there is a real probability that we will indeed perform the promised action, if required.[71]

Thus, for deterrence to have the best chance to be effective, the United States should believe, and be seen by China as believing, that it is willing to pay a substantial cost to achieve its objectives. Threats based on a bluff are likely neither credible nor prudent since the adversary can call the bluff and then the United States is forced to respond from a position of weakness, both militarily and diplomatically, should it choose to seek negotiations.

The question of managing escalation with China is therefore bound up in U.S. capabilities and will (to engage in conflict initially, to endure significant costs in the process, and to run risks of escalation), and China's perceptions of U.S. capabilities and will. These factors, of course, depend on the nature of the crisis or conflict between the United States, its allies and partners, and China. Another border conflict between India and China, for instance, may appear to U.S. political leaders as a significant event that could present an opportunity for improved bilateral relations between India and the United States, but U.S. leaders are unlikely to perceive vital U.S. national interests at stake and, therefore, are likely to be less willing to risk escalation given the potential risks relative to the stakes involved. Political leaders in Washington are more likely to perceive Beijing's aggression against Taiwan, on the other hand, as affecting vital national interests given the magnitude of the consequences should China be successful: an emboldened Beijing, damaged U.S. alliances and partnerships, the potential for nuclear proliferation among allies and partners, and the sheer damage to the U.S. and global economies. Escalation in a Taiwan scenario is thus a greater possibility due to the higher stakes.

The stakes for U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and across the globe over a conflict about the fate of Taiwan could range from significant to existential. For Taiwan, the risks are of course existential in nature, yet other states—such as Japan and South Korea—may see their vital interests at stake as well.[72] China has made clear that its ambitions extend well beyond

Taiwan, as U.S. allies and partners in the region well know.[73] Moreover, U.S. allies and partners that are geographically distant from the Taiwan theater may perceive a greater risk of Russian opportunistic aggression while the United States is engaged in a conflict over Taiwan, raising their own stakes in the outcome of the conflict.[74]

China's Stakes During an Indo-Pacific Crisis or Conflict

The ability of the United States to manage escalation during a crisis or conflict with China depends in large part on what Chinese leaders perceive their own stakes are in a specific scenario. The deeper the national interest, the more likely Beijing may be to risk escalation and to endure greater costs. For the purposes of this chapter, examining the possibility of managing escalation in a Taiwan contingency is most useful because in other potential scenarios, the stakes will be perceived as lower by China and the United States.

Chinese leaders consider the stakes over Taiwan to be at *least* a vital national interest, and potentially an existential national interest. For decades, even since Chairman Mao rose to power in 1949, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders have staked part of their claim to exclusive political power on the promise that Taiwan will be "reunited" with the homeland.[75] What CCP leaders appear to fear is being thrown out of power, a view of "national security" that incorporates both internal and external perceived threats.[76] Failing to achieve their promises about incorporating Taiwan is one scenario that could plausibly, in their minds, lead to a series of events that cause them to be deposed in some fashion. In short, CCP leaders may believe that if a war with the United States is inevitable, then beginning a war with Taiwan and the United States on China's own terms and on its preferred timeline may be the least-bad option in the long run.

The CCP has made its goals exceedingly clear with respect to Taiwan. For deterrence and escalation management purposes, therefore, the United States must consider CCP leaders to be resolute and willing to endure great costs, just short of losing power, while also acknowledging that CCP leaders are fearful of internal instability resulting from a failed invasion. The CCP's close-to-maximal perceived stakes in the outcome of a potential Taiwan conflict appear to make the task of escalation management far more difficult for the United States—an opponent that believes failure is essentially unacceptable would seem to be more likely to escalate to achieve victory. Yet even the fanatically devoted Imperial Japanese military and its political leaders during World War II eventually negotiated the terms of their surrender, so there is no iron law of history to indicate Chinese leaders will be immune in every scenario involving U.S. deterrence threats against escalation before and during a conflict. Nobody can be certain that all attempts at controlling escalation will work, but neither can they say they will not.[77]

Risks of Escalation in the Indo-Pacific

Given China's historical and recent reluctance to engage in risk-reduction talks with the United States, much less in negotiations on actual agreements, U.S. officials should avoid mirror-imaging CCP officials as resolute but cautious to avoid inadvertent escalation or easily misinterpreted actions. Chinese officials simply care far less about minimizing the risk of escalation in the U.S.-

China relationship than does the United States. Instead, CCP leaders care far more about advancing their own interests, even during crises. David Santoro, president and CEO of the Pacific Forum, is worth quoting at length on this point:

> China is more interested in "winning" crises than in managing or resolving them, likely because it is a rising power unsatisfied with the regional and global orders. Furthermore, China views military escalation as a potentially useful way to deal with crises. Thus, while the United States tends to think of crisis avoidance and crisis management mechanisms as tools to help maintain communication between the parties involved in a crisis (notably their military forces) and de-escalate tensions, China is in practice highly suspicious of such mechanisms, even if it is not in theory opposed to them, because it assumes that U.S. officials will want to use them to prevail in a crisis.[78]

This is not to say, of course, that all U.S. attempts to reduce the risk of escalation with China are not worth pursuing or are doomed to failure. Instead, it is valuable to recognize that U.S. attempts to minimize the risk of escalation with China may, on many occasions, best be accomplished unilaterally—that is, through deterrence.

If Chinese officials continue to value opacity over dialogue, then U.S. and allied officials have little choice but to minimize the risks of escalation through the only other means available: deterrence signaling tailored to make clear to China the risks and costs of aggression.

There is an urgent need for the United States and its allies and partners to disabuse Chinese officials of their apparent confidence in their ability to set the pace and scope of escalation during a conflict. People's Liberation Army (PLA) strategists, as summarized by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), have written that:

> If war is unavoidable . . . [then China should be] restraining war by taking the "opening move" and "using war to stop war.". . . [The DOD summary continues:] PLA strategists' interrelated concepts of "effective control" and "war control" describe a multifaceted effort for controlling the timing, pace, scope, and scale of escalation from peacetime through crisis and war. . . . PLA writings on war control highlight the importance of avoiding war when possible, ensuring one fights a winnable war, and, if war is unavoidable, seizing the initiative and minimizing the cost and duration.[79]

The U.S. approach to escalation control, therefore, should be tailored to alter China's perceptions about whether it can indeed control the "timing, pace, scope, and scale of escalation." There are a number of ways the United States can seek to alter that Chinese perception. The United States could act in ways that are surprising to Chinese officials while imposing significant costs on the country, whether that takes the form of revealing exquisite capabilities, shifting tactics unexpectedly, or even escalating the conflict in a manner that remains consistent with defending U.S. national interests at an acceptable risk. If Chinese leaders perceive the United States as weak willed or as likely to respond to aggression with, at most, a symmetric counter, then unexpected U.S. actions, like escalation, may be valuable in prompting Chinese officials to revise their views about U.S. political

will and whether they can control the process of escalation, leading the CCP to perhaps seek war termination sooner than it otherwise might.

The uncomfortable truth is that CCP leaders may be highly motivated to stay the course in their revisionist actions despite the risks and deterrence signals the United States and its allies send.

The uncomfortable truth is that CCP leaders may be highly motivated to stay the course in their revisionist actions despite the risks and deterrence signals the United States and its allies send. In fact, they might even see their immediate and escalatory aggression as the most palatable of a host of strategic courses of action. Shifting the CCP decisionmaking calculus will be difficult in this scenario, especially if their collective bias is toward the belief that China maintains the advantage in perceived stakes in the outcome of a Taiwan conflict. If the United States reacts to Chinese actions in the way CCP leaders anticipate, Washington risks reinforcing Beijing's perception that they can both anticipate and control the escalation process to their benefit. The United States will need to consider how it can react to Chinese aggression in such a way that it significantly alters the CCP perceptions of U.S. capability and will. If the CCP believes that the United States is indecisive, then Washington should act decisively. If the CCP believes that the United States is preoccupied with avoiding inadvertent escalation, then Washington should consider escalating in unexpected ways or with unexpected means. The goal is *not* to escalate for escalation's sake, but rather to act in the way that is most likely to reorient China's decision calculus to reestablish deterrence and thus end the crisis or conflict.

There is one final consideration for the U.S. escalation management strategy: the perceptions of third parties to a U.S.-China conflict. It is not difficult to imagine Russia contemplating aggression against NATO while the United States is engaged in a conflict with China. Such action would, in fact, fulfill a long-standing Russian foreign policy goal of destabilizing the alliance at a time when the costs and risks of such an action would be at their lowest point given U.S. resource constraints. One of the only avenues U.S. officials would have at that point to deter Russian opportunistic aggression would be to demonstrate U.S. capabilities and resolve against China in such a way that it causes the Russian leadership to reassess the potential costs and risks of aggression against vital U.S. national interests in the alliance. Clearly, the United States should not allow the possibility of opportunistic aggression elsewhere to dictate its actions during a conflict with China, but such a risk should remain a consideration in how it conducts such a war.

In summary, U.S. escalation management strategy with China should focus on communicating and demonstrating to the CCP that the United States is better able to control escalation and reduce risks to itself than is China, thus making de-escalation and conflict termination the most prudent, if distasteful, option for the CCP. No matter how a potential conflict unfolds, China's leadership

should imagine that their predicament can always get worse if it continues its aggression, while also knowing there is the potential for relief should China discontinue its aggression. Deterrence by cost imposition, as Robert Peters and retired Commander of United States Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richard argue, requires "the withheld threat of escalation."[80] The United States therefore requires the military forces necessary to pose the credible threat, as perceived by China, of escalation at an acceptable cost in a Taiwan scenario.

Military Tools for Escalation Management

Given the vital interests at stake over Taiwan from the Chinese perspective, it is prudent for U.S. officials to assume that CCP leaders would seek a short, sharp conflict that minimizes both the risk of significant U.S. involvement (in which superior U.S. weapons can be brought to bear over the longer term) and the risk of the CCP facing domestic protests, which would be more likely the longer the war dragged on. Chinese leaders may perceive that a long, drawn-out war over Taiwan might favor China's defense industrial base compared to that of the United States, but domestically, pursuing a prolonged war is unlikely to be a popular position and could even threaten CCP rule if discontent rises quickly and becomes widespread enough.[81] Thus, it is safe to assume that CCP officials will seek a fait accompli over Taiwan if they cannot achieve control over the island through other means.

The most effective U.S. deterrence and escalation management tools will be those that most threaten the Chinese theory of victory, meaning the United States should focus its procurement efforts on weapons systems that are resilient, survivable, and forward-deployed (or deployable) in theater. The United States also requires weapons systems that can be employed selectively to achieve specific political and military goals, preferably those systems already in theater as they provide a more apparent demonstration of political will and capability. This should include both nuclear and conventional capabilities.

Especially considering China's investments in regional nuclear capabilities, CCP officials likely believe that there is some deterrence and coercive value in developing and deploying these capabilities. As the DOD notes:

> The multi-role DF-26 [intermediate-range ballistic missile] is designed to rapidly swap conventional and nuclear warheads and is capable of conducting precision land-attack and anti-ship strikes in the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the SCS [South China Sea] from mainland China. In 2020, the PRC fired ASBMs [anti-ship ballistic missiles] against a moving target in the SCS.[82]

If China believes that the United States lacks the will or capability to employ theater nuclear weapons selectively during a Taiwan contingency, it may play into China's belief that it can control the pace and scope of escalation, ultimately leading to an increased risk of deterrence failure and a prolonged destructive conflict.

If China believes that the United States lacks the will or capability to employ theater nuclear weapons selectively during a Taiwan contingency, it may play into China's belief that it can control the pace and scope of escalation.

Theater nuclear capabilities such as nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-Ns) have a significant role to play in this contingency as highly survivable launch platforms that provide the president with multiple options to employ selectively and toward discrete limited ends. SLCM-Ns on their own, however, may not provide a sufficient regional capability to cover both the Asian and European deterrence requirements simultaneously, especially considering Russia's belief in its own "significant advantages" in nonstrategic nuclear forces over the United States.[83] Given the scarcity of land-based options in the Indo-Pacific and their associated political difficulties, the United States might consider air- and sea-based options, such as developing an air-launched ballistic missile equipped with a hypersonic glide vehicle, or a long-range ballistic missile fired by a surface ship. Ballistic missile options may be especially valuable in that they would complement SLCM-Ns by introducing an additional threat type against which Chinese integrated air and missile defenses would have to defend. Additionally, ballistic missile capabilities can provide a fast strike option that, if paired with adequate intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, can be effective against time-sensitive targets—a capability that, if employed successfully, could facilitate altering China's perceptions about the viability of its theory of victory.[84]

Both U.S. homeland and regional missile defenses will also play critical roles in deterring and defeating Chinese coercive threats, especially in a fait accompli scenario. If China seeks a short, sharp victory, then it may opt for coercive strikes against the U.S. homeland in some form, making the U.S. ability to limit damage strategically valuable from the perspectives of deterrence, extended deterrence, and operational effectiveness. U.S. homeland missile defenses can deter attacks and, should deterrence fail, help defeat attacks against population centers and critical infrastructure that China may target to coerce U.S. disengagement abroad.[85] Additionally, homeland missile defenses can protect U.S. power projection capabilities that will be critical in defeating a rapid surprise attack. Similarly, U.S. theater missile defenses can provide critical coverage for high-value potential targets of Chinese missiles, such as bombers, tankers, and ships in port, allowing those capabilities the chance to deploy away from danger.

From a risk-reduction perspective, U.S. homeland missile defenses offer additional protection against inadvertent escalation while also potentially relieving a perceived need for political and military leaders to rush to a decision on striking back against the adversary. During a crisis, for instance, an adversary may inadvertently launch one or several missiles against the U.S. homeland, be it through a technical error, unclear leadership instructions, or some other "fog of war" factor. A robust U.S. homeland missile defense system could destroy the immediate threat while providing additional decision space for U.S. political and military leaders to further assess the situation and determine whether a response is necessary.[86]

This U.S. escalation management strategy relies on the reinforcing deterrence threats of denial and cost imposition to defeat China's hope for a quick and decisive victory against the United States and its allies. This strategy has the added benefit of incorporating defensive elements that raise the thresholds for both conflict and the escalation of an ongoing conflict. By making it more difficult for China to conduct coercive attacks against U.S. forces, allies, and the homeland, the United States places the burden of escalation on China in a conflict that could quickly threaten the one capability it values the most: the CCP's capacity to rule.

The Role of Nonmilitary Tools in Escalation Management

The military tools described above should help prompt Chinese leaders to assign greater credibility to U.S. diplomatic efforts, making diplomatic options that may appear unpalatable in competition seem preferable to the alternative in a conflict. As Frederick the Great purportedly claimed: "Diplomacy without arms is music without instruments."[87] What, then, are the nonmilitary options that the United States can employ to manage escalation risk with China?

Given China's refusal to engage in significant or sustained risk-reduction fora or even in bilateral discussions, the United States is fairly limited in its ability to seek to reduce risks of escalation. As with the military tools for escalation management, most nonmilitary options are reduced to being deterrence focused. The threat of crippling economic sanctions, for instance, may prove to be a helpful tool in deterring a Chinese attack against Taiwan since the CCP's power base relies on providing a level of economic prosperity domestically.[88] The value of this approach lies in its additive benefit when combined with the military tools described above—together they present economic, political, and military costs that are difficult for the CCP leadership to dismiss. There are limits to this approach, however, since China is highly likely to anticipate such sanctions, build up its strategic reserves, and hope that a quick and favorable resolution of the Taiwan conflict would prompt global markets to open once again to China.

Diplomatically, U.S. options are even more limited, although still worth pursuing. The United States can maintain its historic openness to bilateral dialogue with China on strategic matters—an open invitation to discuss topics such as transparency, inadvertent escalation, risk mitigation, operational doctrine, and threat perceptions. The United States can continue pursuing fora on expanding nonmilitary risk-reduction measures with China, such as pre-launch notifications, track 1 and 2 dialogues, and military-to-military communication channels. These measures, however, are mostly useful pre-crisis or pre-conflict.

Should China continue to value opacity over dialogue, the United States could mount a concerted effort in conjunction with allies to speak with nonaligned states, or those inclined to side with China, on matters of nonproliferation.

Nevertheless, should China continue to value opacity over dialogue, the United States could mount a concerted effort in conjunction with allies to speak with nonaligned states, or those inclined to side with China, on matters of nonproliferation. China has faced little international pressure to adhere to its commitments under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons during its ongoing massive nuclear buildup.[89] A joint U.S.-allied effort to speak candidly with nonaligned states, hear their concerns, and communicate the facts of China's nuclear buildup may leave China with fewer options to block diplomatic censure in the future. As with economic sanctions, however, this effort would likely be limited in its effectiveness since nonaligned states may have more to lose economically if they confront China on nuclear topics than they have to gain if they cooperate with the United States.

It is difficult to identify further sources of leverage that the United States can employ to induce China to enter into risk-reduction talks other than demonstrating the potential costs should it continue to choose not to engage. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) demonstrated that even when the United States and Russia mutually agreed to nuclear force reductions, that was insufficient to induce China to restrain itself. Thus, further calls for the United States to unilaterally cut its nuclear forces or otherwise constrain its actions in the hope of creating the conditions for China to discover the benefits of restraint are likely ill-fated and imprudent.[90] Similarly, promises to negotiate away U.S. nuclear, conventional, or missile defense programs that only exist on paper are unlikely to persuade China to cease its very real nuclear and missile buildup.

Conclusion

The United States must guard against an ethnocentric view that any lack of progress in risk-reduction talks with China must be a product of U.S. officials not trying hard enough, or not speaking to the right officials in the right forum.[91] China's strategic culture values opacity and ambiguity, and U.S. attempts to fundamentally alter that value structure will necessarily be a lengthy, and potentially unsuccessful, process. What the United States can do, however, is utilize the numerous military and nonmilitary tools at its disposal to demonstrate to Chinese leaders that although they may value keeping the United States at arm's length even for simple strategic dialogues, there is a significant price they will pay in terms of a degradation in their own security. The CCP can choose to reverse course and U.S. officials should continuously make clear that such a change of direction would bring numerous benefits in terms of increased transparency, more predictability, and less chance for miscalculation. But for this strategy to have a chance of succeeding, the United States must coordinate its efforts across departments to avoid sending mixed signals. A U.S. effort centered around diplomatic engagement with little strengthening of U.S. capabilities will appear toothless and unpersuasive, while engagement featuring only enhanced military capabilities and little diplomatic incentives for discussions will only encourage an aggressive CCP reaction. Deterrence and diplomacy are mutually supportive, and both must be tailored to the unique attributes of the CCP for the United States to have the best chance of developing effective risk-reduction measures concerning China.

No Nuclear Substitute for Conventional Denial

Adam Mount

In recent years, U.S. national security officials have warned that China's expanding conventional and nuclear forces will pose new challenges to U.S. plans to manage escalation in the Western Pacific. Many experts see continued value in maintaining conventional forces that can deny China its military objectives, but are losing confidence in the U.S. defense posture. Multiple prominent studies have argued that if the United States cannot field sufficient conventional capabilities, it will have to depend more on its nuclear forces to maintain deterrence.[92] The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission warns, "if the United States and its Allies and partners do not field sufficient conventional forces to [deter and defeat multitheater aggression], U.S. strategy would need to be altered to increase reliance on nuclear weapons."[93] Similarly, a U.S. Institute of Peace study group concluded that "without more robust deterrence of conventional war by non-nuclear means . . . the United States will become increasingly reliant on nuclear threats."[94]

At the same time, allies are deeply concerned about whether U.S. political leaders remain committed to their security.[95] The White House has threatened to abandon allies, decreased material support for the defense of Ukraine, and has sometimes prioritized diplomatic agreements with authoritarian adversaries over the interests of allied governments. For allies, these events have raised important questions about how the United States would act to manage escalation if they were attacked. To some U.S. officials, nuclear forces could also help to address the concerns of allies. In 2016, President Trump suggested that allies could acquire nuclear weapons to "defend themselves" and reduce the monetary cost of U.S. extended conventional deterrence.[96] Many deterrence experts have argued that additional U.S. nuclear capabilities, or the forward-deployment of U.S. nuclear capabilities, could reassure allies who are concerned about abandonment in the face of Chinese aggression.[97]

Nuclear weapons are not effective substitutes for conventional denial or for alliance cohesion in deterring or resisting a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. There is no substitute for credible, combined conventional deterrence.

The simultaneous deterioration of U.S. conventional superiority and extended deterrence credibility poses a double challenge. As U.S. officials work to improve their ability to manage escalation in East Asia, they will have to account for both trends. As more and more experts turn to nuclear capabilities for redress, it is an important time to assess how additional reliance on nuclear weapons will affect escalation management options. Can increased reliance on nuclear weapons compensate for declines in alliance cohesion and the relative capability of U.S. conventional forces?

This paper argues that nuclear weapons are not effective substitutes for conventional denial or for alliance cohesion in deterring or resisting a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.[98] There is no substitute for credible, combined conventional deterrence. Escalation management strategies that increase dependence on nuclear weapons not only pose risks to crisis stability; they also could accelerate the degradation of conventional deterrence and alliance cohesion.

The paper follows the Project Atom framework. First, it describes Beijing's tactics for advancing its strategic objectives: seeking local conventional advantage and decoupling its neighbors from U.S. alliances and partnerships. Second, the paper outlines potential escalation pathways that could lead to high-intensity conflict and nuclear use. Third, it evaluates the relative utility of conventional and nuclear options for escalation management along these pathways. It concludes that the most credible way to deter Chinese aggression is to directly confront its two tactics by demonstrating the capability for conventional denial and maintaining alliance cohesion. The section explores why U.S. nuclear employment options have limited utility for managing escalation in a conflict over Taiwan and indicates a number of strategic, operational, and political disadvantages of increased reliance on nuclear use. The paper closes by exploring the implications of the argument for risk-reduction measures.

Adjusting Reliance

Though U.S. policy documents frequently refer to reducing reliance on nuclear weapons, the concept requires a more robust definition. U.S. deterrence posture consists of a range of nuclear and nonnuclear capabilities. Nuclear reliance is high if the United States lacks credible alternatives to nuclear use for attaining its objectives in plausible and salient contingencies.

In practice, most U.S. officials believe that both nuclear and conventional weapons are complementary and that both are necessary for a credible deterrence posture.[99] Furthermore, the U.S. strategic deterrence posture consists of capabilities in multiple domains and functions, including space, cyber, missile defense, diplomatic, and economic, all of which can contribute to escalation management or escalation risk. However, this simplified nuclear-conventional model is a

helpful heuristic for considering the consequences of shifting conventional balance in Asia, as well as proposals that would increase reliance on nuclear weapons to compensate.

Shifts in technology—and a range of decisions about force structure, force posture, operational planning, and declaratory policy—can affect the degree of nuclear or conventional reliance. Historically, the United States has sometimes increased its reliance on nuclear forces and sometimes decreased it. U.S. presidents have periodically tried to strengthen deterrence by reducing their reliance on some escalation management options in favor of others—for example, by acquiring additional capabilities, by directing military commands to develop plans, or by shifting force posture to enhance the credibility of preferred options.

For instance, the Eisenhower administration increased reliance on nuclear forces precipitously, as postwar demobilization and rising confidence in the credibility of nuclear deterrence combined to eviscerate conventional U.S. posture in Europe.[100] Uncomfortable with the degree of reliance on nuclear options, the Kennedy administration started a transition to flexible response, which sought increased flexibility in nuclear planning and endorsed the value of credible conventional forces for deterring limited conflict.[101]

Policies that attempt to shift reliance among U.S. capabilities may or may not succeed. An administration may attempt to develop new options but lack the capabilities to execute them; the planning processes may be inconclusive; or adversaries and allies may not consider the deterrence options to be credible. In recent years, both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations tried to reduce reliance on nuclear forces by developing conventional substitutes. The 2001 Nuclear Posture Review classified both nuclear and nonnuclear systems as one leg of a "new triad," which it claimed would lead to "opportunities for substituting non-nuclear strike capabilities for nuclear forces."[102] Former Commander of U.S. Strategic Command General James Cartwright led a major effort to develop advanced conventional capabilities that could service targets in nuclear war, which would, in his view, obviate the need for lower-yield nuclear warheads. Cartwright's goal was "to take the accuracy to the point where conventional can substitute for nuclear."[103] At that time, most nuclear weapons experts doubted that conventional weapons could represent a viable substitute. Programs started in these years have dramatically expanded the number, range, and capability of standoff precision conventional strike options, but they did not directly replace requirements for nuclear forces.

Attempts to shift reliance may fail. Even if new capabilities or plans are developed in one domain, the United States may continue to depend on options in another. Attempts to shift reliance can also have unintended consequences. By redirecting resources, adjusting force posture, or changing the content of policy documents read by allies and adversaries, attempts to increase reliance on one set of options may inadvertently decrease the credibility of other options.

Chinese and U.S. Strategic Objectives

Beijing supports its strategic objectives of national economic, military, and diplomatic rejuvenation with two overlapping campaigns for regional dominance. In recent years, the United States and its allies have appeared to lose confidence in their ability to confront both tactics.

First, China seeks to attain freedom of military action in the region to support its expansionist territorial claims and coercion of neighboring states. Beijing pursues local primacy by threatening neighboring militaries with escalation dominance and developing anti-access options to complicate U.S. power projection. China's rapidly expanding military and civilian fleets regularly violate the airspace and territorial waters of its neighbors to probe and stress defensive networks.[104] These activities provide a groundwork for military aggression against Taiwan and any states that support its defense, as well as coercion of neighboring governments in peacetime.

Second, China seeks to isolate its neighbors from U.S. influence, undermining the network of alliances and partnerships that is intended to provide vulnerable countries with an alternative to Chinese hegemony.[105] At least since 2017, erratic political leadership in Washington has placed severe strains on U.S. alliances. Donald Trump's hostility to alliances, insulting comments to certain Asian allies, remarks supportive of allied nuclear proliferation, extortionate positions on burden sharing, and his various cabinet appointments have all raised questions about U.S. commitment to the interests of its allies and partners in the region.[106] U.S. allies are not only concerned whether U.S. officials have the resolve and tact to defend their interests against Chinese aggression, but also whether Washington will dismantle the alliances outright. These concerns will likely persist beyond the second Trump administration.

China believes that a rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal can support both tactics. Leaders of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) believe that a large nuclear arsenal enhances their coercive leverage against the United States and its partners, forcing them to remain neutral in militarized crises or to concede on terms advantageous to Beijing.[107] At a strategic level, Chinese military leaders believe that a large arsenal can compel the United States to recognize China as a great power and abandon attempts at containment. Tong Zhao, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has described how an expanded arsenal is intended to support "political stability," a concept that entails U.S. deference to Chinese sovereignty and conciliatory positions on military and nonmilitary interests. Chinese officials have traditionally refused to accept responsibility for managing the risks of nuclear escalation.[108] Zhao notes that Chinese officials believe that their "activities could not be responsible for creating any risk of nuclear escalation and hence China bears no responsibility for managing nuclear escalation risks."[109]

For the better part of the last century, the United States has committed to maintaining a forward presence to support a free and open Pacific.[110] U.S. extended deterrence posture aims to prevent the onset of a crisis; to expose and defend against intrusion, subversion, and coercion at the sub-conventional level; to deny an adversary control of allied territory in a conventional conflict; and to deter nuclear attacks and reestablish deterrence following nuclear first use. The central objective is to defend the core interests of U.S. allies in the region, including their territorial integrity, democratic governance free of foreign interference, and secure connection to the network of international trade. U.S. forces will attempt to terminate any conflict at the lowest level of violence consistent with these objectives but may escalate a conflict if necessary to attain them.

The Trump administration's actions have raised questions about its commitment to these principles and whether its attempts to manage escalation would conform with existing plans developed with allies.[111]

Escalation Risks

Preparing to deter and contest a high-intensity conflict with China is the pacing challenge for the United States. While the United States and its allies will prepare for a broad range of possible contingencies, only two scenarios carry a high risk of precipitating a general war and nuclear crisis: Chinese aggression against Taiwan and Chinese involvement following North Korean aggression against South Korea or Japan.[112]

There are three primary escalation pathways that could precipitate a U.S.-China nuclear crisis. First, a limited conflict could escalate inadvertently if one side misperceived the other as initiating a nuclear attack or an adversary's armed forces carried out a nuclear operation contrary to the intention of their commander in chief.[113] Second, if it were losing a limited conflict, China could carry out nuclear first use in an attempt to limit U.S. power projection from the continental United States or bases in the region, to coerce a U.S. partner into acquiescing, or to destroy forces defending against its attack. Third, if the United States were losing a limited conflict, it could carry out nuclear first use to destroy attacking Chinese forces, to attempt to coerce Beijing to terminate the conflict, or to deter another adversary from escalating the conflict horizontally. Again, other scenarios are possible. A nuclear exchange could be singular and symmetrical, nonlinear and punctuated, or rapid and strategic.[114] U.S. nuclear and conventional forces must prepare for the full range of possibilities.

Tools for Escalation Management

For U.S. officials, effective escalation management depends on having credible capabilities to escalate at will and credible means of committing to refrain from escalating. Military capabilities provide options to (1) deter adversary escalation; (2) avoid circumstances where the United States and its allies are forced to escalate to attain their objectives; and (3) avoid circumstances where the United States and its allies cannot attain their objectives and must deescalate. In the simplified model identified above, U.S. officials have conventional and nuclear capabilities to support their escalation management objectives.

U.S. nuclear employment options have limited utility for favorably resolving a crisis . . . [and] increased nuclear reliance has significant disadvantages for strategic bargaining, operational planning, and alliance management.

The most reliable means of deterring Chinese aggression is to directly confront its two tactics: pursuing regional primacy and decoupling U.S. alliances. Confronting China's attempt at local primacy requires conventional denial—principally, the capability to physically deny Chinese forces access to the territory of neighboring countries aligned with the United States. Resisting China's decoupling tactics requires alliance cohesion—a high degree of political and operational coordination to attain shared national objectives. If Washington can convince Beijing that it cannot attain its political objectives through military force or coercive wedge strategies, Beijing would lose an incentive to initiate a crisis or to employ nuclear weapons in any crisis that does arise.

However, given persistent questions about whether U.S. political leadership is able and willing to maintain conventional denial and alliance cohesion, some experts have suggested increased nuclear reliance as a next best option. This section develops two related claims. First, U.S. nuclear employment options have limited utility for favorably resolving a crisis. Second, increased nuclear reliance has significant disadvantages for strategic bargaining, operational planning, and alliance management. Both claims are particularly true in circumstances where U.S. conventional denial and alliance cohesion are in doubt.

LIMITED UTILITY OF NUCLEAR EMPLOYMENT

Unless U.S. and allied conventional forces can deny China its military objectives, U.S. limited nuclear first use would probably not change the outcome of a crisis.[115] U.S. officials considering nuclear first use to defend Taiwan have two sets of employment options. The first set of options would aim to compel Chinese leaders to accede; the second set of options would use a tactical effect to support defending nonnuclear forces.

The first set would be intended to compel Chinese capitulation by raising the risk of a broader strategic exchange. A nonlethal demonstration or a limited attack against an isolated facility or naval unit would be a form of brinksmanship intended to warn China that it could face additional nuclear strikes if it continued an invasion. Following a U.S. demonstration, Chinese leaders would have three options: capitulate, escalate to the strategic level, or ignore the initial demonstration strike and continue to press the conflict. Given China's traditional rejection of the logic of limited nuclear war, the risk of escalation to a strategic exchange would be significant.[116]

Overall, the probability of China capitulating following U.S. nuclear first use is probably low. Absent the conventional capability to deny China control of Taiwan, coercive nuclear employment would probably not decisively shift the outcome of the conflict. If Chinese leaders have ordered an invasion of Taiwan, they will have weighed the possibility and consequences of a U.S. nuclear first use and developed a strategy that they believe can survive a limited attack. In short, it is unlikely that U.S. nuclear first use would alter the calculations of China's leadership about the outcome of the conflict or the risks of a strategic exchange.

On the contrary, Beijing may see U.S. nuclear first use as a reason not to capitulate. Chinese leaders may believe that they have additional justification for nuclear or conventional attacks against the territory of U.S. allies, more diplomatic latitude for escalatory action, or more of a reputational stake in continuing to prosecute the invasion.

The second set of employment options would be intended to produce a tactical effect. In this role, U.S. nuclear forces would supplement the ability of conventional forces to destroy advancing forces, supporting command and control, or logistics units. For proponents of this option, "militarily relevant" nuclear forces would need to be "continuously forward-deployed, survivable theater nuclear forces that can reliably penetrate adversary defenses with a range of explosive yields, and on operationally relevant delivery timelines."[117]

U.S. officials would likely judge that nuclear strikes against targets on the Chinese mainland carry a higher risk of escalation than maritime targets. U.S. nuclear attacks on the Chinese mainland would expose U.S. bases in Guam, Japan, the Philippines, Australia, potentially South Korea, and even U.S. territory to increased threat of nuclear attack. Therefore, the primary initial set of targets would be against PLA Navy amphibious forces preparing to assault Taiwanese beaches.[118]

U.S. nuclear attacks could complicate an amphibious landing. Multiple detonations could potentially inflict significant damage on concentrations of Chinese naval vessels preparing to deliver amphibious units to beaches or ports, particularly to unarmored civilian vessels or barges.[119] Chinese commanders could disperse surface vessels to mitigate their vulnerability, but this would likely decrease the efficiency of their landing operations. In any case, several U.S. nuclear attacks would be required to destroy or disable a sufficient proportion of the likely hundreds of invading naval and amphibious craft to be decisive. A series of nuclear strikes against multiple beachheads and ports, possibly protracted over multiple days, would probably be required to have a military effect. The greater the number of nuclear strikes required, the lower the chance a U.S. president would authorize nuclear strikes for tactical effect.

The military consequences of nuclear strikes present a complex picture. Regardless of the number and effects of nuclear attacks, U.S. and allied conventional forces would still be required to destroy landing amphibious units. The dispersal of Chinese amphibious units would expose a greater proportion to conventional attack, but multiple nuclear strikes on the Taiwanese littoral would also complicate the operations of U.S. and allied general purpose forces.

DISADVANTAGES OF INCREASED NUCLEAR RELIANCE

U.S. strategists value nuclear deterrence as a way to enhance the credibility of conventional deterrence and to provide options for escalation in the event that deterrence fails. However, relying on nuclear options for escalation management can have significant disadvantages for resolving conflicts on terms favorable to the United States and its allies, especially at lower levels of escalation. Increased nuclear reliance could have disadvantages for U.S. credibility, campaign planning and acquisitions, the availability and lethality of U.S. and allied forces, and alliance management. For these reasons, increased nuclear reliance may complicate or inhibit the ability of the United States to maintain conventional denial and alliance cohesion.

Strategic Disadvantages

Increased reliance on nuclear forces could unintentionally signal that U.S. officials lack confidence in their ability to deny Chinese objectives using conventional forces. While U.S. officials are unlikely to explicitly state that they are increasing reliance on nuclear forces, Beijing or U.S. allies

may interpret statements about requirements for new nuclear capabilities in this way. Decreased conventional deterrence credibility could have three unintended implications that could persuade Beijing that an attack might succeed.

First, China may interpret increased nuclear reliance as a signal that U.S. officials will hesitate to commit sufficient conventional forces to prevail on the battlefield or that the United States may be more likely to withdraw regular forces earlier in a war. If Chinese officials are particularly concerned about U.S. conventional denial capability, they may be emboldened by signals of increased nuclear reliance.

Second, increased nuclear reliance could increase the risk of nuclear escalation. If Beijing believes that U.S. strategy depends on limited nuclear employment, Chinese officials may be more susceptible to misperception or more liable to try to preempt what they perceive as an incoming nuclear attack.[120]

Third, it is possible that Beijing may prefer to face a United States that is reliant on the threat of nuclear use.[121] Consistent with their tradition of depicting nuclear restraint as a valuable political tool in international forums, Chinese leaders may calculate that the United States would incur relatively higher costs from a limited nuclear exchange (costs to diplomatic standing, to the unity of a multinational defensive coalition, or to domestic support for the conflict).[122] They may believe that a U.S. nuclear response would lend credibility or pretext to Chinese nuclear use against U.S. theater installations. Consistent with its belief in the disutility of nuclear weapons, China may be more inclined to see a nuclear threat as a bluff, especially because U.S. officials have limited options for visible nuclear posture changes to increase the credibility of nuclear threats.[123] If Beijing is primarily concerned with the outcome of a conflict, it may even perceive singular or symmetrical limited nuclear use as less costly than conventional defeat.

Military Disadvantages

U.S. strategists customarily think of nuclear and conventional deterrence as complimentary, because having credible nuclear options can (1) signal that U.S. leaders are resolved to fight conventionally while deterring escalation; (2) contain escalation to the conventional level; and (3) destroy targets on the battlefield in support of conventional operations. However, in some ways, increased reliance on nuclear weapons may decrease the capability of conventional forces to deny China its military objectives. Though the trade-offs between nuclear and conventional reliance are rarely discussed in nuclear policy debates, they could shape the options available to U.S. commanders and officials in a conflict.

At the level of force structure and campaign planning, the effect of increasing reliance on nuclear weapons is ambiguous. On the one hand, the expenditures required to develop a new nuclear triad constrain the entire joint force. U.S. officials commonly refer to the set of programs that will replace the U.S. nuclear arsenal as a "top priority" and "imperative" even as costs rise dramatically.[124] Though Congress has steadily increased defense budgets despite large deficits, nuclear delivery systems represent some of the largest expenditures in the defense budget, which creates fiscal and supply chain trade-offs with conventional forces. In 2024, after new estimates put the cost of

the Sentinel ICBM program 81 percent over budget, Air Force Vice Chief of Staff General Jim Slife said that the costs would be offset by cuts to other programs, and the service began speculating about reductions to the rate of purchases of F-35 fighter aircraft.[125] Acquisition of expensive nuclear delivery vehicles may decrease funding for research, munitions, or sustainment that could increase the capability, readiness, and lethality of conventional platforms. Further afield, big ticket dual-capable systems may be constrained by requirements for nuclear delivery, which may crowd out other programs or attributes that could enhance conventional effectiveness (including unmanned systems).

On the other hand, programs to replace and upgrade the existing nuclear triad will continue regardless of whether future presidents consider them necessary for escalation management. While replacement of the arsenal imposes significant constraints on conventional forces, the degree of reliance probably does not.

At the level of force posture and operational planning, increased nuclear reliance poses larger constraints on U.S. conventional forces. Planners must make a set of decisions and assumptions about how U.S. dual-capable assets will be armed in peacetime, postured in a crisis, and used in wartime. In a conventional conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary, demand for dual-capable assets would increase for both nuclear and conventional missions. U.S. commanders would want to have credible nuclear options available, both on reserve at bases in the continental United States and on station in theater. Bombers that are held in reserve for deterrence signaling, limited nuclear employment, or potential escalation to a strategic exchange would be unavailable for deployment to forward bases in Guam or Australia and delivery of conventional munitions to the Taiwan Strait, a mission that commanders have identified as critical to the outcome of a conflict there. Virginia attack submarines loaded with planned sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-N) will have fewer vertical launch cells available for conventional munitions.[126]

Commanders may also be more hesitant to deploy nuclear-armed assets in certain combat roles. For example, they may believe that attack submarines carrying a mix of nuclear and conventional munitions are riskier to operate in forward positions than boats armed only with conventional weapons. It may also be the case that nuclear threats issued by U.S. officials could raise the risk that the deployment of dual-capable aircraft and ships is misperceived as signaling a nuclear threat or nuclear strike mission, particularly against targets on the Chinese littoral or territory. Additionally, in wartime conditions where Chinese commanders may have degraded situational awareness, nonnuclear aircraft and ships are more likely to be misperceived as nuclear-capable. For these reasons, commanders may be more risk averse with nuclear-capable assets, decreasing the number of combatants that can be committed to conventional denial.

Policies that increase reliance on nuclear weapons for escalation management may create a self-fulfilling prophecy if they decrease the credibility and effectiveness of conventional forces.

Even in peacetime, certification and training requirements for dual-capable air and naval crews will be higher, decreasing operation tempo and potentially complicating an effort to surge forces into the Western Pacific during a crisis. Similar considerations may also constrain the availability of enabling capabilities, including tankers that must refuel aircraft on nuclear delivery or signaling missions, tactical aircraft assigned to protect nuclear bombers, dual-purpose command and control aircraft and satellites, or intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets that may be redirected from advancing conventional units to nuclear targets.

In summary, policies that increase reliance on nuclear weapons for escalation management may create a self-fulfilling prophecy if they decrease the credibility and effectiveness of conventional forces. If U.S. conventional forces are fewer, less credible, or more risk averse in a limited conflict, U.S. officials may face a narrower set of options to manage escalation as a crisis evolves.

Alliance Management Disadvantages

U.S. escalation management options critically depend on the actions and capabilities of its allies and partners. Allied stakes contribute credibility to the commitment to defend, their conventional forces contribute capability that increases the credibility of threats to escalate, and their posture and operations could significantly affect the credibility of an attempt to deescalate, especially if China perceives those actions be inconsistent with U.S. policy.

In recent decades, U.S. allies have considered extended nuclear deterrence to be stabilizing, reassuring, and even critical to their security. However, there are a number of ways that reliance on U.S. nuclear capabilities has already reduced the cohesion of alliance relationships. Furthermore, declines in conventional advantage and perceived commitment of U.S. political leadership may complicate or invert any assurance benefits of extended nuclear deterrence.

In most cases, U.S. and allied officials rely on combined conventional forces to defend allied territory and deny an aggressor gains from an attack. This defense strategy can be strengthened by combined operational planning, forward-deployed conventional forces to serve as a tripwire, and programs to jointly develop and operate advanced military technology. All of these activities provide allies with information about and confidence in how U.S. forces will act in a crisis.

By contrast, an alliance that is increasing reliance on nuclear forces has a more tenuous foundation for military cooperation. For example, U.S. officials are habitually reticent to share information about nuclear plans.[127] Nuclear deterrence dialogues are typically abstract and led by specialized officials who often do not participate in overall operational planning. Opportunities for combined exercises and planning for nuclear missions mostly comprise uncomfortable conversations about the risks to allied forces from U.S. nuclear strikes and whether allies will escort U.S. bombers in theater.

The central problem is that the more an alliance depends on nuclear forces for escalation management, the more dependent an ally is on a decision of a U.S. president to issue nuclear threats or to order nuclear employment. Because U.S. presidents have sole authority to order a nuclear strike, U.S. officials cannot commit to nuclear use in any specific situation. Not only allied

commanders, but also U.S. commanders, may have questions about when, why, and how a U.S. president would order the use of a nuclear weapon. Even when U.S. and allied leaders enjoy a close relationship and have strong conventional denial capabilities, this uncertainty can alarm allies. However, if the resolve and judgment of U.S. political leadership come into question—and if U.S. strategy becomes more dependent on nonstrategic nuclear options earlier in a conflict—this dependency becomes a severe vulnerability.

In the context of committed leadership and capable conventional forces, U.S. nuclear forces are understood to provide a reassuring backstop for rare circumstances in which combined conventional forces may be unavailable or insufficient. In a context where U.S. commitments and conventional capabilities are called into question, however, U.S. nuclear forces may not appear as reassuring. With a U.S. president threatening repatriation of U.S. forces, allied leaders might even interpret a shift to increased reliance on nuclear forces as another sign of abandonment, particularly if they see it as a form of offshore balancing for a president hesitant to commit U.S. conventional forces to the defense of allies overseas.

RISK-REDUCTION OPTIONS

Prospects for meaningful, bilateral, negotiated risk-reduction measures between the United States and China are limited. The chances are equally low in the conventional and nuclear domains, for the same political and strategic reasons. Both countries exhibit a high degree of mistrust and conviction that the other side has adopted destabilizing practices. Neither Beijing nor Washington is likely to acquiesce to negotiated limits on nuclear warheads or delivery systems because both are in the middle of acquisition programs for strategic and theater systems.

In the conventional domain, U.S. officials will have to make several crucial decisions that will influence the risk of escalation, including the timing and magnitude of force flow to the region, the geographic envelope of the conflict, and the categories of targets. However, because U.S. officials are concerned about the risk of strategic surprise and conventional inferiority, they are unlikely to take risk-reduction steps that rule out potential options for imposing costs or degrading the ability of the PLA to generate military power.

Both countries believe that their opponents are the primary contributors to escalation risk. U.S. officials believe that Chinese collocation of nuclear and conventional systems intentionally raises the risk of unintended nuclear escalation, while their own expanding inventories of dual-capable systems are stabilizing. Both countries regularly rely on command and control, electronic warfare, and intelligence assets for both nuclear and conventional missions. Neither side perceives an incentive for additional transparency with respect to the readiness and posture of nuclear or conventional forces.

However, both Washington and Beijing prefer to avoid nuclear escalation if possible. Both sides intend to prevail in a conflict with conventional forces and neither maintains operational plans or launch procedures that would lead to automatic nuclear use. Therefore, both sides have an incentive to be clear about circumstances that would abruptly or significantly raise the risk of a

nuclear attack. Though possible, an official dialogue for this purpose is unlikely as both sides would be skeptical of red lines articulated behind closed doors in peacetime.[128]

Unilateral public statements that define nuclear firebreaks and establish declaratory restraints on conventional and nuclear forces may have more value. In a conflict, leaders may be more likely to correctly interpret their adversary's intentions if they can verify that their opponent's military operations are adhering to their prewar declaratory statements.

Given the complex interaction and escalation risks between strategic conventional and nuclear forces, statements that define this relationship could help to clarify intentions in a crisis. For example, a U.S. president could declare that conventional strikes against an adversary's nuclear forces are subject to the same declaratory standard as U.S. nuclear use, at least in circumstances where the United States can distinguish conventional Chinese systems and facilities from those that carry out or support nuclear operations. This would effectively establish that "*the United States would only consider conventional attacks on an adversary's nuclear forces in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its Allies and partners*."[129]

Other formulations are also possible. For example, U.S. officials could declare that they would only consider nuclear use in circumstances where they lack effective conventional options for attaining their military objectives.[130] Alternatively, they could state that they would not consider preemptive nuclear or conventional attacks against Chinese strategic nuclear systems if the U.S. homeland is not at risk. This type of statement could reduce the risk that counterforce attacks on Chinese theater dual-capable systems escalate to a strategic exchange.

Military officials no longer have the luxury of thinking about strategic stability as an isolated domain of military competition. The operations of conventional forces critically affect nuclear escalation risks. This pertains not only to strategic conventional systems, like conventional ballistic or hypersonic glide weapons, but general purpose forces engaged in a theater conflict. Managing these complex interactions will require U.S. officials to adopt a broader perspective on integrated planning, deterrence signaling, alliance management, and risk-reduction efforts with adversaries. For the critical Taiwan scenario, there is little reason to think that increased reliance on nuclear weapons would provide effective options for intentional escalation or reduce the risk of unintended escalation.

Overestimating Prospects for Escalation Management

Kori Schake

Introduction

General Lauris Norstad, NATO's supreme allied commander Europe during the most demanding time of both Soviet pressure on the West and intellectual ferment about how to manage escalation in a nuclear-age crisis, was deeply skeptical that careful and calibrated management of escalation was possible in a NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation. He rejected graduated escalation ideas from the Kennedy administration, saying, "In warfare, escalation is apt to be explosive."[131] While exploring means for preventing unintended escalation is incredibly valuable, this paper cautions against being persuaded that preventing escalation is either an objective good in and of itself, or that management of escalation is possible despite the fundamentally incompatible political objectives that would drive a U.S.-China confrontation.

Preventing escalation is an important—and, in the nuclear age, possibly essential—element of strategy. Determining whether the war aims remain worth achieving as costs mount is the strategist's tradecraft. Conveying the stakes is especially important in free societies where participation and legitimacy rest on winning domestic political arguments. But reifying escalation prevention as an end in itself prejudices the analysis because the only sure way to prevent escalation is to cede the political objectives for which conflict was accepted.[132]

The only sure way to prevent escalation is to cede the political objectives for which conflict was accepted.

The management of escalation is notoriously difficult, even in a pause of conflict. It is impossible to know with certainty if an adversary will accept defeat, respond symmetrically and proportionally, or attempt to radically alter the dynamic. The time elapsed in responding can be perceived as significant, rightly and wrongly. Opportunities for misunderstanding abound, and signals are rarely understood by adversaries as intended, when they are understood at all.[133] As the number of parties involved in a conflict increases, their interactions become even more difficult to anticipate and manage.

U.S. Allies and Strategic Objectives

As it has evolved since the end of World War II, U.S. strategy has centered on using the country's military dominance to underwrite regional security in Europe and Asia. That security has made possible broad economic prosperity for countries that opt in to the political and economic order created by the United States and its allies.[134] The canonical demonstration of the differences produced by opting in or out of this order is the nighttime illumination map of the Korean Peninsula, clearly illustrating South Korea's economy producing per capita GDP more than 50 times that of North Korea.[135] It is an order premised on the engagement of the United States and its allies to expand to other countries their domestic compact of free markets and representative governments, of collective defense and consensual problem-solving.

As it enters the second quarter of the twenty-first century, the United States is facing a question of historic proportions: Will the country continue to extend itself to preserve that international order as its margin of military and economic dominance thins, as authoritarian capitalism produces an alternative model of success, as war rages in Europe and looms threateningly in Asia, as allies have allowed more and more of the risk for protecting their countries to shift to the United States, and as Americans are in a grim mood, focused on domestic challenges and divisions?

Even though preserving a beneficial world order is manifestly less costly and less dangerous than taking a chance on the emergence of an equally secure and prosperous order, the United States is so well insulated, geographically and economically, and so risk-tolerant culturally, that the temptation is strong to withdraw from the obligations and institutions that created the order in the first place. Broadly speaking, what is at stake for the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific is the preservation of the existing international order, particularly as U.S. faltering in defense of that order in Europe is casting a long shadow over security in the Indo-Pacific at the very time People's Republic of China (PRC) irredentism is (literally) setting boats rocking throughout the region.[136]

Narrowly, the stakes for the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific come down to two objectives: (1) maintaining the physical and political sovereignty of Taiwan, and (2) preventing PRC control of disputed territories and economic assets. China is already threatening both through relentless military pressure on Taiwan and through military contestation of claims by the Philippines, Vietnam, and other countries to waters, resources, and islands in the South China Sea.

Some of the advocates of prioritizing the second objective—containing PRC control—do not consider the defense of Taiwan essential to preserving U.S. interests in Asia. However, that is not the view of

either China or of any of the other Asian countries.[137] Letting China conquer Taiwan would collapse confidence in U.S. willingness to continue upholding the sovereignty of regional allies, requiring either a dramatic increase in the cost of reestablishing reassurance or much greater instability and compensation strategies by countries in the region.

Allowing the Chinese conquest of Taiwan, or the creeping accretion by China of rules that preferentially benefit China, would be to openly accept a PRC sphere of influence. The post-1945 world order has abjured spheres of influence—even by the United States, as acceptance of first Soviet and now Chinese involvement in Latin America shows—but such influence is precisely what Russia is proclaiming in Europe and China in Asia. Unless the United States and its allies continue upholding the international order that asserts as equivalent the claims of both powerful and weak states, the United States will be accepting a spheres-of-influence order that will exclude it from vast swathes of the world and some of its most dynamic economies, strengthening the very states that seek to curtail U.S. political and economic interests.

Of further concern is that an ebbing of the post-1945 order presages a cascade of nuclear proliferation in Asia.[138] While some political scientists may theorize that having more nuclear states would be stabilizing for the international order, leaders responsible for their countries' safety have been far less cavalier in their assessments. The strong preference both of security guarantors and even most of the protected states has been for an external nuclear possessor to extend deterrence from their own arsenal to cover allies, even with all the fraught vulnerabilities associated with such an arrangement. All three major U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific (Japan, South Korea, and Australia) have the ability to become nuclear powers; they have elected not to, believing they are more secure relying on the U.S. deterrent rather than developing their own nuclear arsenals because of what that development could precipitate from their adversaries.

Objectives in the Indo-Pacific are the central U.S. defense priority, not only by decree of the last four presidential administrations' national defense strategies, but also because China poses the most demanding threats. Taiwan is to the China challenge what Berlin was to the Soviet challenge: both impossible to defend and essential to defend. Failing to uphold the order there will cause the order to crumble in its more defensible realms. The objectives do not fit into a broader vision so much as define the vision.

The fundamental U.S. objective in the Indo-Pacific is preservation of the security status quo.[139] Washington is attempting to stanch the increasingly aggressive actions from Beijing that corrode confidence that the existing order can be maintained. To achieve this objective, it is essential to sustain allied willingness to participate alongside the United States by acknowledging political alignment, providing territory for U.S. bases and operations, participating in military exercises and planning, and conveying the prospect of committing their own military forces should war break out. Without allied cooperation of these kinds, the United States cannot remain a Pacific power, able to conduct sustained military operations across the vast Pacific Ocean. It cannot attain the scale, economically or militarily, to constrain China.[140]

China's strategic objectives appear to be fundamentally at odds with those of Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Canberra, and Taipei—namely, ending Taiwan's political and physical sovereignty, and severing the lifeline of U.S. security guarantees to regional countries. Achieving those objectives would leave China dominant in the region, and the United States marginal. And China is well on the way to achieving those objectives, both because of its actions and because of the uncertainty U.S. choices are injecting into the equation. Historically, the way incompatible objectives are reconciled is by war. Someone wins and someone loses. The winner's objectives are then attained. This dynamic is especially prominent when contending for dominance; there is only a single instance of a dominant power peacefully conceding rule-giving power to a rising challenger, and that is Britain to the United States in the late nineteenth century.[141]

The only exceptions to the historical pattern are democratic states, which have tended to resolve differences by mutual agreement. The famous example is the "Cod Wars" between the United Kingdom and Iceland, a series of violent confrontations during the 1950s and 1970s, resolved when Britain, which had the dominant naval force, capitulated to the demands of Iceland, which had only a coast guard, not a navy.[142] The Cod Wars comprise a fabulous example of the dynamic of consensual order, because Britain could have enforced its objectives militarily but instead determined its interests were better served by conceding to an inferior military so that it could gain cooperation on other objectives.

Since China is unlikely to democratize before a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific, conflict avoidance is only likely if either China or the United States concede their objectives. That outcome appears improbable on Beijing's part, given the more than 3,000 PRC incursions into Taiwanese airspace in 2024, and the subsequent military exercises that rehearse surrounding Taiwan, including the circumnavigation of Australia and the conducting of live-fire exercises.[143] Whether the United States will continue to maintain its objectives is less certain, as PRC military capabilities improve and impose increasing costs not just of war in Asia but of risks to the United States' homeland. Maintaining U.S. objectives—preserving the security status quo in the Indo-Pacific—is the seminal test of whether the United States will cede its rule-setting and enforcing power in the international order. And while that sounds esoteric, it is the only way to prevent China from dictating where and on what terms U.S. businesses can operate, how the United States can interact with other countries to advance its interests, and to ensure the sovereignty of the United States and its allies.

Escalation Risks in the Indo-Pacific

There are four primary escalation risks for a U.S.-China conflict:

1. China attempts to force Taiwanese capitulation by bombardment or invasion;
2. China attacks a U.S. ally and the United States joins the fight to protect Australia, Japan, the Philippines, or South Korea;
3. China impedes access to Taiwan by blockading either inside or beyond Taiwan's territorial waters; and

4. China accidentally engages military forces operating in proximity, the result of either reckless unprofessionalism by the PRC military or use of gray zone civilian fishing fleets in conjunction with PRC navy activities in disputed waters and islands.

These risks are heightened if China's leadership concludes that the United States is poised to strengthen its position relative to China.[144] In that circumstance, China's leaders may determine that a window of opportunity to defeat the United States is closing. This is a real possibility, as the United States claims—and has claimed since the "pivot to Asia" in 2011—that it is strengthening its military position relative to China. There have been U.S. national defense strategy declarations, operational concept developments by the military services, force posture adjustments to reduce the vulnerability of stationed and surged forces, allied agreements expanding uses of territory, and defense spending increases by allies. But these need to be weighed against the fact that China has increased its shipbuilding lead and its defense budget continues to climb while U.S. defense spending fails to keep pace, stationed and assigned forces have seen little increase, and the Pentagon continues to strip Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) assets for needs in the Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility.[145] The window of opportunity for a PRC victory could well be perceived as further opening rather than closing.

There are numerous scenarios that could prompt a crisis of China lurching to conquer Taiwan, establishing a blockade of Taiwan, or provoking a military incident at sea or in the air with U.S. or allied forces: (1) belief (exacerbated by Ukraine's slipping out of Russia's grasp) that Taiwan was becoming irreversibly Western rather than Chinese, (2) concern that China's own population was beginning to emulate Taiwanese or agitating for political freedoms the Taiwanese enjoy, and (3) reaction to countries in Asia diplomatically recognizing Taiwan (and thereby closing the window for "reunification"), to name a few.

WINNING WITHOUT FIGHTING

It is also possible that China could be confident of achieving its objectives without direct military confrontation with the United States.[146] That could loosen the demands of time as a variable for China—if its prospects were increasing without having to engage the many uncertainties of resorting to force, there could be advantage to playing for time. And the Trump administration is doing much to alienate allies and inject economic uncertainty, diminishing U.S. power. But nothing in the political or doctrinal statements of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership suggests that this is the case. To the contrary, Xi Jinping has reiterated his commitment to the "unification" with Taiwan and directed that the People's Liberation Army have the ability to deliver it by 2027.[147]

THE NEED FOR SPEED

In these and virtually all scenarios, it benefits China to act and then to escalate quickly. China has incentives to move fast and project a sense of automaticity as a way of heightening U.S. and allied anxiety. It benefits China to present a fait accompli if it can, resulting in the more difficult reversal of military gains rather than the prevention of them, and foisting onto the United States and its allies decisions of appropriate response. The high baseline of military activity China has established in routine harassment of Taiwan and the Philippines would facilitate quick aggression. By acting rapidly, China complicates U.S. ability to organize a multilateral response since, despite

Trump administration demands for prior commitment, allies would preserve their decisions about involvement until the crisis erupts.[148]

Nor would a U.S. president be likely to respond quickly, since no effort has yet been made by this or even previous presidents to persuade Americans of the merits of going to war with China for the defense of Taiwan, or to educate Americans about U.S. commitments to the Philippines. Furthermore, a U.S. response is unlikely to be swift because of the lack of routine interagency coordination in the Trump administration; time would be needed to determine what to do. The recklessness of Trump policy on a number of fronts would also inhibit allies joining, further extending the time required to establish a common front. The Trump administration conducts vanishingly little allied diplomacy, leaving that work to the regional military commander. To his credit, Admiral Samuel Paparo is actively supporting allied efforts, but risks repudiation by U.S. political leadership should a crisis occur. The uncertainty of Trump policy undercuts deterrence by opening a gap between deterrence and crisis action.

The slow paces of policy determination and allied coordination further incentivize Chinese first-mover advantages because the U.S. response would at least initially appear ineffective. U.S. and allied debates over policy decisions would occasion journalistic questioning of whether and how to respond, highlighting differences among any coalition and feeding into PRC descriptions of free societies as weak. This would allow China to intimidate U.S. allies into denying support and refusing participation. Time elapsing before U.S. action would also give China the opportunity to coordinate support from its own allies, specifically, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. If China's aggression appears to be succeeding, its partners can more easily be persuaded to provide political and material support, negating the U.S. description of any Chinese move as contrary to regional interests and seemingly paralleling the U.S. advantage of a coalition fighting together against an aggressor.

Response speed—or lack thereof on the part of the United States and its allies—would also encourage escalation by China during a crisis or conflict. Slow U.S. reaction could persuade China's leadership that they are succeeding and can therefore expand their war aims. Expansion could entail either horizontal escalation (e.g., widening the war to other theaters or moving against several contested claims in the South China Sea) or vertical escalation (e.g., going from blockade to invasion of Taiwan or demonstrative nuclear use to try to ward off U.S. or allied involvement).

President Trump has publicly indicated that the U.S. response to any PRC aggression would be asymmetrical and in the form of massive economic consequences, and that threat is probably more credible than that of a symmetric military response by the Trump administration. Speaking hypothetically about PRC aggression in 2024, President Trump stated, "I would say: If you go into Taiwan, I'm sorry to do this, I'm going to tax you at 150 percent to 200 percent."[149] Such a response would by definition be slow because of the time economic sanctions take to have effect. The Trump administration's on-again, off-again tariff announcements and balking at sustaining economic sanctions against China devalue any further economic threat. Moreover, as with so much of Trump administration policy, there are internal contradictions and conflicting statements. The president has even mused that Taiwan lying so close to large China destines it to Chinese subordination.[150]

The only way a desultory response could benefit U.S. strategy is by dampening concern about erratic behavior by the United States. Political science literature finds as a high-probability the unexpected conclusion that free societies are more durable in commitment than are authoritarians, because, having won the domestic political argument, leaders in free societies have a more difficult time repudiating their commitments.[151] Allies have long been concerned about the United States militarizing any potential conflict.[152] Giving time between PRC aggression and U.S. response could shore up goodwill that the United States is deliberating seriously and addressing allied concerns.

CONTROLLED ESCALATION?

China's theory of victory is the "effective control" (*youxiao kongzhi*) of crises, that is, escalation management. People's Liberation Army doctrine prioritizes war avoidance, instead seeking favorable outcomes by shaping the environment. As Lyle Morris writes, Beijing advocates "fighting only when prepared, ensuring military goals do not subsume political goals, and terminating a war to ensure postwar stability. . . . In the event of conflict, China would apply a highly scripted, scientific approach to escalation in which it manipulates escalation dynamics throughout the conflict's various stages."[153] Chinese military theorists are confident in their abilities to effectively signal and control escalation, and in their capacity to utilize all elements of state power in a coordinated way. Of course, this is easier to theorize than attain, especially since the PRC military has little actual experience of war.

Fracturing U.S. alliances would be a central element of China's theory of victory before, during, and after conflict, as they acknowledge it to be a major U.S. advantage.

Fracturing U.S. alliances would be a central element of China's theory of victory before, during, and after conflict, as they acknowledge it to be a major U.S. advantage.[154] This could take the form of diplomatic intimidation, weaponized economic interdependence, and even potentially treating allied territories as sanctuaries in return for denying U.S. access or allied participation. Smart theories of victory for China would be to maneuver the United States into exposing gaps between its declaratory policy and actual willingness to run risks in carrying out that policy, or by exposing the inadequacy of U.S. military capabilities.

Escalation in the Indo-Pacific would look like China provoking a confrontation. If the United States proves unable to deter aggression from China, the form that aggression takes would be important. If the confrontation were an incident at sea, it is unlikely that escalation would be automatic given how high the political stakes would be. Both sides would rush to attribute blame to the other and influence public and international opinions. China could capitalize on a clumsy U.S. response to change the status quo, casting itself as the aggrieved existing power and complicating coordinated responses by U.S. regional allies.

Military Tools for Escalation Management

The roles of the military in escalation management comprise preventing near-term failure, providing options, attempting to hold the current situation in place while other means are applied to attain success, and, failing all else, preventing China from achieving its objectives by military force. Achieving these aims will require substantial increases in U.S. and allied military capabilities, including better air defenses, longer strike ranges so assets can remain out of Chinese range but still fight effectively, and greater dispersal of forces to complicate targeting. Given that China's naval forces are significantly larger than the U.S. Navy, that the China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea alliance is solidifying, and that European allies will be consumed with concerns over stability in their own neighborhood, U.S. homeland protection and increasing the number of ships in the U.S. fleet (which will require more shipyards and allied participation) should also be priorities.

Yet the difficulties associated with China's success are substantial. Their military is untested and may not be that good at getting out of port or across the strait. Taiwan has few accessible ports and landing beaches to provide for an invasion force that likely would be larger than the allied landings on D-Day.

The more integrated, and publicly acknowledged, conventional and nuclear forces are, the less likely China or U.S. allies are to believe the United States would fail to escalate, and therefore, the stronger the deterrence of those forces. It is difficult to assess if the United States or China benefits more from crossing the nuclear threshold. Demonstrative use without military effect by either country is unlikely to be perceived as determinative, and any such use would invoke widespread international condemnation without achieving either enhanced deterrence or battlefield gain. U.S. first use is conceivable in three circumstances: (1) for military utility as a strike on military forces or facilities to impede their use once war was underway, (2) for political signaling of U.S. commitment to persevere as costs and risks rise once war was underway, and (3) as a substitute for lack of conventional munitions if war failed to be concluded quicky. Those same circumstances are likely to apply for China, but with two more conceivable first uses: (1) a nuclear attack on the U.S. homeland to demonstrate its vulnerability and impose domestic political costs for the U.S. involvement either before or during conflict, and (2) attacking a U.S. ally's population centers to shock it and others into denying their support and participation.

Diminishing the nuclear taboo benefits the state less likely to win using conventional military forces; preserving the taboo clears the way for conventional force to determine the outcome. Therefore, first use is more likely by the state losing the war once conflict starts. But the two additional circumstances that might merit Chinese first use—their asymmetric advantages that accrue by deterring U.S. or allied involvement—would seem to benefit Chinese first use to a greater extent than would U.S. first use. If the United States crossed the nuclear threshold, it would signal a lack of confidence in conventional victory and neutralize the moral advantage that the United States would otherwise hold as defender rather than aggressor.

Off-Ramps and Risk-Reduction Tools

Given the enduring political stakes and China's manipulation of connectivity in order to impose risk on the United States and its allies, off-ramps and other risk-reduction strategies hold little potential in a U.S.-China conflict involving Taiwan. The United States and its allies publicly express *more* concern about "World War III" than do China and its allies. The Western allies consider risk reduction an objective good, and while that tendency may be perceived as weakness by China, it is advantageous in cohering support for the U.S. and allied position. Still, there are principles for risk reduction that would advantage the United States and its allies: Primarily, do not empower the bad guys, and strengthen your own forces and partners.

A possible path to risk reduction is strengthening deterrence. This could take many forms: expanding the U.S. nuclear arsenal, establishing true ballistic and cruise missile defenses of the United States, expanding nuclear sharing with allies, reintroducing nuclear weapons with U.S. forces stationed in allied countries, significantly improving conventional military forces, and strengthening U.S. and allied defense industry through coproduction. While effects-based operations have fallen from fashion because of the difficulty of actually determining what adversaries value, if what Xi values could be determined, it would certainly be preferable to all other counter-value approaches. The United States may not have perfect intelligence, but there are evident vulnerabilities, such as the loyalty of the military to the CCP and Xi personally. Once war has begun, value determination is easier done by watching for what the CCP moves to protect. Expanding the aperture of conflict beyond the straits also holds promise, as does targeting China's artificial islands, its base in Djibouti, and oil transiting the Indian Ocean.

A less ambitious approach to risk reduction would be to solidify the U.S. main advantage—allied cooperation. Burden sharing with allies can increase the assets available to challenge China with economy of scale politically, militarily, and economically. Furthermore, burden sharing can minimize escalation risks through constraining U.S. responses by either refusing support and basing access or refusing essential participation of their own. Giving allies a veto over U.S. actions would make allies both more comfortable and more responsible for the ultimate outcome. Allies could become more assertive if they are confident that they control escalation and have full U.S. support for their policies and operations. This approach to risk reduction would be facilitated by improvements in allied military capabilities. Such cooperation would also address concerns about collusion among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, highlighting that while U.S. allies have lots of friends, the authoritarian cabal has only each other.

Rather than reduce risk of conflict, the United States should develop ways to manipulate the risks that China's leadership are running—both in terms of domestic control and potential for war.

If U.S. adversaries remain ruthless in manipulating risk, the United States and its allies should consider the possibility that risk reduction may not be the most advantageous starting point. Rather than reduce risk of conflict, the United States should develop ways to manipulate the risks that China's leadership are running–both in terms of domestic control and potential for war. The United States and its allies could convey that the Chinese homeland would not be a sanctuary for either conventional or nuclear attacks, that their satellite constellations could be attacked preemptively, and that attacks would extend throughout the kill chain, emphasizing that the United States has never foresworn first nuclear use and would not now. The United States could cease attempting the covert compromise of PRC intelligence assets, instead making overt attempts to increase leadership paranoia. The country could pollute PRC domestic surveillance data and capitalize on vulnerabilities in their infrastructure to heighten concerns about transport and energy systems. The United States and its allies could amplify corruption within the leadership and military. In addition, the United States could allow its military forces more permissive rules of engagement for confronting PRC forces in the air and at sea. Finally, the United States could cease to restrain or blame Taiwan for public statements about independence.

Such an approach would necessitate both a clear policy and elegance of execution, and so may be out of reach. And China is surely better at unified government policy, consistency of policy across time, and insulating policy against public defection than is the United States. But if it could be enacted, this approach would seize the initiative from China, eliminate its asymmetric advantage in imposing risk, and better penalize its disruptions to the status quo. If it succeeded in defanging China's aggression, it would reestablish deterrence without requiring significant improvements. Of course, if this approach failed, it would not better position the United States and its allies to prevail in the conflict. In fact, it would likely worsen the U.S. hand by increasing allied concern about U.S. choices and possibly dissuading their participation in any U.S. actions.

“Today is not the day”

How the United States’ Allies Contribute to U.S. Strategic Advantage in Deterrence and Escalation Management

Rebecca Shrimpton

Introduction

Strategic deterrence has been a foundational element of U.S. national defense policy for more than 70 years.[155] Geopolitical tides have shifted, but the use of coercion, compellence, control, denial, and cost imposition to influence an adversary’s decisionmaking has remained a strategic constant. What has changed are the ways and means available in the deterrence tool kit, and the role that expanding alliances can play both in deterrence and in escalation management. The inextricable relationship between offensive and defensive systems remains dynamic as new technologies promise disruptive change.

A conversation on extended nuclear deterrence (END) is pertinent within this broader framing—END arrangements emerged primarily from U.S. concern over uncontrolled nuclear technology proliferation. Such arrangements also offered the potential for combined and coordinated operations between the United States and its security allies to common strategic ends: a division of labor that could be strategically meaningful and operationally effective.

With today’s expanded concept of national security, END arrangements bring into play a fuller range of options for the use of allied power and capability across the diplomacy, information, military, and economic (DIME) spectrum to complement and reinforce U.S. deterrence and enhance escalation management.[156] As the strategic deterrence and conflict management tool kit expands and integrates, so too do options and mechanisms for collective security outcomes.

Lacking the quality, quantity, and delivery capabilities of the United States, from the mid-1990s, China developed new strategic concepts designed to enable credible coercive leverage below the nuclear threshold.[157] In China, the United States and its allies face a pacing threat that conceptualizes escalation dynamics and nuclear war very differently than previous U.S. adversaries. China's evolving concepts of deterrence and escalation management contain critical insights regarding how China may behave in a crisis. Moreover, they suggest an expanded set of roles and responsibilities that U.S. allies could assist with to compete with and disrupt China's efforts.

In the military realm, allied capabilities can significantly expand the spectrum of conflict escalation management options available to the United States, from special forces and irregular warfare activity in the gray zone at one end, to conventional military capabilities that strategically interface with nuclear options at the other. Allies complicate the challenge for any adversary looking to deny or defeat U.S. nuclear capability. Furthermore, allies open opportunities for horizontal and lateral escalation and can contribute to vertical escalation.[158] Importantly, allies may bring credible de-escalation options into play as direct products of the diversity of politics, geographies, and capabilities that strong alliance networks represent.

Creating a sophisticated and strategically integrated alliance system is no small task. The United States has decades more experience in this area than China. Alliance management has been a long-term investment for the United States that has resulted in a global network of capable partners. Long recognized as a key enabler of U.S. global military operations, U.S. allies also share the burden, cost, and risk for the deterrence protections provided under END.

Alliance relationships need constant tending. Different assumptions about perceptions, capabilities, and wills—if not regularly tested between partners—can challenge coherent allied strategy. There is a unique lens on this issue today: China is demonstrating an unprecedented level of coordination and cooperation with its own set of strategic partners at the same time as U.S. alliance management is straining under questions related to U.S. assurance, credibility, and reliability.

Taking primarily an Indo-Pacific (specifically Australian) perspective, this paper examines how allies contribute to deterrence and escalation management for U.S. and allied planners and their support of U.S. strategic advantage.[159] While strategy, policy, and capability developed in Canberra and other allied capitals can enhance U.S. efforts, they can also undermine them. Each country necessarily takes an independent view of its sovereign national interests; domestic politics and perceptions of how Washington manages its external relationships have significant influence on the contours of allied policy.

Yet the unwavering shared strategic objectives of deterring war and managing crises below the nuclear threshold are strong drivers of a collective and coordinated approach at a time when the risk of the spread of major war and instability is particularly acute.

The key ideas and concepts applied in any discussions of deterrence and escalation management must engage directly with the use of nuclear capabilities and nuclear posture. Such discussions must also recognize that these issues reside at the extreme end of the military force continuum.

Fiona Cunningham offers a persuasive analysis of China's "strategic substitution" approach, the kind of adaptation that demands renewed intellectual and policy focus in Washington and in allied capitals.[160]

Military engagements, alliances, and partnerships, complemented by defense cooperation arrangements and multilateral frameworks for expanded security cooperation, can serve as connective tissue between the defense investments and strategies of regional actors.

Escalation management needs to be aware of and account for interactions between the military and other sources of national power and influence. Strategists need new thinking about de-escalation, arms control, and other risk-reduction dynamics. Traditional approaches are not sufficient for the challenge.

Strategic military capabilities are most decisive when integrated into targeted (adversary-centric), calibrated (nuclear, conventional, and irregular capability), multidomain (land, sea, air, space, and cyber), and distributed (multiple actors across geographies) strategies.[161] The consequences of the failure of U.S. strategic deterrence are potentially paradigm-inverting (for the purposes of this paper, "failure" is defined as the actual use of a nuclear weapon in conflict). Within the kaleidoscope of evolving global trends pointing to a more dangerous and contested world, none is perceived to be accompanied by the level of catastrophe as is nuclear conflict. Once crossed, the nuclear threshold—with all its assumptions, myths, perceptions, and practical realities—cannot be uncrossed.

An Allied Perspective

Military engagements, alliances, and partnerships, complemented by defense cooperation arrangements and multilateral frameworks for expanded security cooperation, can serve as connective tissue between the defense investments and strategies of regional actors. Taken together, these connections can convey a collective commitment to a vision for regional security and provide concrete platforms for collaboration and combined force deployment among U.S. allies and partners.

Along the continuum of conflict, from peacetime to crisis and war, strong military collaborations and partnerships between allies expand the escalation management tool kit. Within the Indo-Pacific, the military value of partners able to realize combined operations both regionally and with the United States is high. Fiscal constraints and competing demands on national budgets in the context of a rapidly deteriorating security environment elevate efficiency, industry, and burden sharing to a strategic necessity for the United States as well as its allies. The logic behind the

United States' hub-and-spokes alliance model—specifically as it applies in the Indo-Pacific—remains strategically sound. Moreover, it is fortified by increased habits of intra-regional cooperation.

Xi Jinping's messaging at his September 2025 victory parade suggested that China does not fear U.S. military capability. Yet the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains laser-focused on every ally, rotational force, forward base, maintenance and sustainment hub, U.S.-friendly satellite, satellite ground station, and undersea cable as theater force multipliers for U.S. military capability. A basic but important function of U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific is the seed of doubt that each injects into decisionmaking in Beijing. Achieving this doubt credibly, and particularly in a targeted fashion, requires the highest level of diplomatic and bureaucratic skill. The United States should have a significant advantage over China in this capability.

Early diagnosis and practiced options for crisis escalation management are vital to the process of illuminating alternative strategies. They are particularly powerful inputs for war-gaming allied contributions to the targeted, calibrated, multidomain, and distributed strategies identified above as necessary to be decisive. Regional countries can contribute to credible conventional military responses, providing options for lateral escalation into other military or nonmilitary domains and horizontal escalation to induce geographic complications for adversary strategy.

Regional allies, especially in a China scenario, will offer different and informed perceptions on Chinese thresholds and redlines: A contest of assumptions is necessary to plausibly define options that can influence the cost-benefit calculus of any actor considering crossing the nuclear threshold. Through the inclusion of the analyses and calculations of allied conventional, irregular, and nonmilitary capabilities into escalation management planning, the United States can vastly increase its own arsenal of options.

For Australia in particular, the dynamics and vectors of strategic change and compounding risk bring a unique set of challenges. The Indo-Pacific theater contains not only the single greatest strategic rival to the United States, but also a series of decades-long flashpoints and territorial disputes. These have assumed greater significance as the CCP's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has become increasingly aggressive in pressing regional claims and demonstrating its power projection and area-denial capabilities. Furthermore, the failure to deter Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in significant military industrial uplift across Asia, matching rises in Europe and the Middle East.[162]

Australian policymakers have long recognized that major crises in one part of the world have serious consequences in others. The ultimate worst-case scenario for any defense and military planner remains a high-end, major conflict between nuclear-armed adversaries across multiple regions. The "two-peer problem" has become a major focus of U.S. strategy in 2025; conversations about it must include allies across multiple geographic commands.[163] An opportunistic attack by a nuclear power in the Indo-Pacific while the United States and key allies are engaged in managing conflict in Europe represents one of the most extreme risks that the United States faces. Partners across the U.S.-allied global footprint can and must contribute to managing escalation risk and limiting damage in any potential nuclear conflict.

Crossing the nuclear threshold is a weighty decision, infused with unparalleled historic, political, social, psychological, economic, and military significance. Conventional military systems and capabilities can arguably rival the nuclear realm in operational effect, if not in the public imagination. Some capabilities have a unique potential contribution to strategic leverage and stability in a China scenario. For example, the space and cyber domains stand out for their civilian, political, economic, and military interdependencies. As conventional military domains that offer *non-kinetic* and *reversible* use of force options, space and cyber capabilities are integrating with new and emerging technologies with military applications that can help level the playing field against the high bar of nuclear in terms of strategic military effects.

Allied nonnuclear capabilities can reinforce and complement the effectiveness of U.S. strategic forces. In particular, nonnuclear capabilities open the aperture for allies and partners to contribute more meaningfully to deterrence and escalation management and to help reduce the burden on the United States to maintain dominance in all aspects of an increasingly complex and demanding set of interrelated military and dual-use technologies.

Efforts to coordinate among Seoul, Tokyo, Washington, Canberra, and Manila on strategic deterrence, contingency planning for escalation management, and war fighting under a nuclear shadow lag behind the growing challenge from China. The U.S.–Republic of Korea Nuclear Consultative Group; the Washington Declaration; the 2023 Camp David trilateral agreement; and the Australia-U.S. nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarine program (AUKUS Pillar 1) and advanced technology cooperation agreement (AUKUS Pillar 2) are examples of efforts to strengthen institutional and strategic-level engagement designed to assure U.S. allies and safeguard the nonproliferation regime.[164] Yet they are insufficient.

These political-level initiatives are supported at the bureaucratic and operational levels by a series of bilateral deterrence dialogues; multilateral official, track 1.5, and track 2 workshops; and by major military war games, exercises, and force posture activities. These various engagements and activities all play a role in deterrence. To optimize their impact on escalation management, however, they need greater focus, urgency, and cogency. Collaborative multinational analysis to inform policy and planning conversations can overcome inherent challenges, including differing threat perceptions and gaps among allies in expectations and understandings, both politically and militarily. Policy and planning conversations need to rapidly become more collaborative, informed, and specifically oriented toward credible collective deterrence.[165]

Stakes of a Potential Nuclear Conflict in the Indo-Pacific

The likelihood and consequences of nuclear conflict are increased by geopolitical instability. In the Indo-Pacific region, specifically, there is already active irregular and gray zone activity; confrontation, attacks, and hostile activity in cyberspace and outer space; and the weaponization of information.[166]

Russia's full-scale conventional invasion of Ukraine, complete with explicit nuclear threats, increased concerns of opportunistic attacks, with limited indicators and warnings, against the

United States and its global interests in the Indo-Pacific region. It is not possible to disentangle the web of malign actors in the Euro-Atlantic theater from those in the Indo-Pacific. The uptick in aggressive civilian and military activities by China in the Indo-Pacific theater, including increasing incidents of dangerous and unprofessional behavior by the PLA, is occurring against the backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating security situation in Europe, which is perceived to distract and degrade the United States.[167]

Indo-Pacific actors, including China and North Korea, are participating both directly and indirectly in the continuation of the conflict in Europe, seeking to optimize transactional gains.[168] Furthermore, the evolving dynamics among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea introduce highly unpredictable and destabilizing political variables, all with serious implications for U.S. and allied interests. The Trump administration's tariff policies and political treatment of long-standing security allies have enlivened questions of U.S. credibility and resolve under END provisions. In Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines—all treaty-level security partners of the United States—there is regular debate on the policy of reliance on the United States for strategic assurance. Combined, these developments have intensified concern over nuclear issues and conflict within the Indo-Pacific.

The stakes of nuclear conflict in the Indo-Pacific are all-encompassing: economic, military, social and psychological, political, technological, and informational. The perceived increased risk environment has reignited nuclear proliferation concerns, with genuine debate strengthening in South Korea around the potential benefits of developing independent nuclear capabilities, making the country the most plausible nuclear breakout risk in the region.[169] In contrast, Japan faces significant popular and political opposition to becoming a nuclear power, despite momentum forming behind important revisions to its security posture and hardening domestic attitudes toward Chinese aggression. Domestic politics in Australia would preclude a move toward developing independent nuclear weapons, although Canberra was closely involved in early UK and U.S. nuclear weapons development. South Korea, Japan, and Australia all likely have the nascent capacity to develop nuclear weapons, should the politics (and time) allow it.[170]

The line between competition and conflict is blurring in the Indo-Pacific.

Few, if any, nations can match China's capacities for long-term planning or for centrally driven, integrated, and state-controlled civil-military strategy and investment. With sustained effort, the growth, modernization, and enhanced survivability and lethality of the PLA are undeniable.[171] This begs questions as to what a theory of victory might be for China in any nuclear use scenario and how the country might practically apply its comprehensive military-civil fusion doctrine.[172] China's nuclear modernization is scaffolded by decades of focused investments in space, cyber, and missile technologies that clearly demonstrate President Xi Jinping's vision of a "system of systems"

approach to warfare.[173] China appears to be seeking a form of parity with the United States in structure (i.e., pursuing a nuclear triad) and quantity of nuclear warheads before it will engage in arms control conversations.[174] The lack of agreed-upon crisis communication mechanisms between the Chinese and U.S. militaries heightens the risk of accident and misinterpretation.

China will take advantage of its geography in any potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific. The United States and its allies will need to deal with a hotly contested logistics environment and with major PLA military efforts to block the flow of U.S. forces and supplies into the region, efforts which would be necessary to support sustained military operations against the PLA, especially in the case of potential nuclear employment by either side.

The line between competition and conflict is blurring in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, interpreting actions and signals on both sides is complex, given the gaping differences in political systems, cultures, and worldviews between China and the United States. As China modernizes and grows its military capabilities, evolves its force structure, and adapts its posture, it is beginning to look more like the modern, sophisticated military of the United States. This development increases the risk of "mirror imaging" in both systems, which can increase miscalculation.[175] What may be considered a reasonable threshold for nuclear use in Beijing may be very different in and among Washington, Canberra, Tokyo, Seoul, and Manila.

The Evolving Context for Escalation Risk and Management in the Indo-Pacific

Enabled by critical technology developments and increasing social, economic, and military applications, geostrategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific are changing on the ground quickly. At the same time that China's comprehensive influence and strategic communications strategy show indications of flowering in pockets of the Pacific and Southeast Asia, evidence is also surfacing about the compromises, costs, and sovereignty risks associated with making deals with China.[176]

Putting aside questions about U.S. policy coherence and how the United States intends to work with allies and partners under a Trump presidency, allies need to have honest conversations about the overall threat picture in the Indo-Pacific and to work together to sustain political commitment to collective efforts to deter and counter China. More granular discussions on specific geographic, capability, and operational allied contributions can flow from a clear political direction across allied capitals.

The United States arguably enjoys a position of dominance in key strategic capability domains (nuclear, space, undersea) and in some dual-use technologies. Though this position has been eroded by Chinese gains driven by explicit strategies for dominance, self-sufficiency, and superiority, these areas remain a perceived opportunity by allies for greater technology cooperation.[177] Collaborating in key sensitive military technologies to collectively outpace or outcompete Chinese investment and development will take deliberate effort, commitment, and cooperation. Building and maintaining a superior technological qualitative edge in key capability areas requires a collaborative approach to optimize U.S. and allied military and technological advantage.

Alternative Strategic Objectives in the Indo-Pacific

China's strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific put it at odds with the United States, its allies, and its partners. China seeks to build a credible capability to control the seas, skies, and space over the Indo-Pacific, which could deny the United States the ability to operate freely from key regional bases, including critical air, naval, and missile defense facilities hosted on Guam. Forward U.S. forces can expect to be challenged by Chinese efforts to disrupt continental U.S.-based lines of communications and support. Already, freedom of navigation through international waters—critical to U.S. trade routes—is routinely, and increasingly forcibly, challenged.

Xi Jinping seeks to make good on the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by 2050, an achievement that cannot contemplate an adversary or a competitor with the power projection, global presence, and binding military alliances that the United States currently enjoys in the Indo-Pacific.[178] To reach Xi's stated goals, China must edge the United States out of the Indo-Pacific and remove the primary threat it presents to China's ability to operate with relative regional freedom of maneuver.

Australia looks to the United States for signals of the latter's continued commitment to the alliance and active, forward-leaning strategy and posture within the theater.

U.S. regional allies do not want the United States to retreat from the Indo-Pacific region and thus enable China to assert greater political, economic, and military influence and control. Australia has already declared that its strategy and policy are deeply committed to its long-standing, treaty-level alliance with the United States, including the various END provisions, and its commitments under the AUKUS nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarine arrangement.[179] Australia looks to the United States for signals of the latter's continued commitment to the alliance and active, forward-leaning strategy and posture within the theater. Allies should be informed and prepared to engage on how their interests intersect with U.S. strategy and military planning.

The United States' bilateral treaty relationships in the Indo-Pacific have high intelligence, strategic, and operational values. Together, they offer the United States a formidable, distributed, geographic force posture that vastly complicates Chinese military planning. Recognizing these strategic, geographic, logistic, and operational advantages, China seeks to disrupt pro-Western security cooperation on multiple fronts. China's success in the Pacific and in parts of Southeast Asia to secure sensitive and strategically located access and facilities and to exercise political interference points to the value China perceives in undermining U.S.-ally relationships.[180]

China is developing networks of dependency—economic, political, and military—that will enable it to exercise power and influence through a range of international and national levers, including through covert operations, (overt and covert) coercion, and transnational crime networks.[181] Taken

together, the CCP's expansive efforts across the civil-military divide, within the influence and information domains, and through its opaque and unqualified military modernization investments result in a radically different model of international relations.

Indo-Pacific Pathways to Escalation

Given current global dynamics, the roads to conflict in the Indo-Pacific are highly unpredictable and complex. One plausible and potentially catastrophic scenario for the United States and its regional allies is Chinese aggression to achieve a fait accompli invasion of Taiwan. With parallel regional crises in Europe and the Middle East—and with some of the United States' critical military enablers and strategic capabilities directed to support European or Middle Eastern requirements—China could feel emboldened to optimize the element of surprise and make a high-risk, high-impact move. Operational planners must assume that the range of Chinese nuclear capabilities would be in play in such a situation.[182]

Scenario planning helps military and strategic planners engage with a spectrum of contingencies and actions across multiple domains. The United States and its regional allies in the Indo-Pacific need to contemplate hostile actions as diverse as cyberattacks; foreign interference; limited or total blockades; limited invasions (e.g., of offshore islands); a full-scale invasion of Taiwan; the use of sophisticated anti-access, area-denial systems for offensive and defensive purposes; and the possible use of nuclear weapons for carefully calculated effects. These actions may be used in any combination or sequence, and deterrence options need to be flexible and adaptive.

Collaborative scenario exercises can produce informed, robust analyses as the basis for planning options. Such exercises can help participants understand both regional actors' perceptions of the threat from China and their policy positions regarding any possible contribution to a Taiwan contingency. Discussions between allied officials on possible escalation pathways and plausible scenarios can contribute to more coherent strategies. The demands of escalation management in a Taiwan scenario are immense, requiring bolder conversations on potential divisions of labor and unity of effort.

Other regional scenarios could tip into conflict, with multiple flashpoints of specific concern. Maritime disputes in the South China Sea, in which China is a principal claimant, involve Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Notably, incidents and confrontations between the Chinese military, coast guard, and maritime militia and other nations' maritime and air assets have been escalating in the South China Sea.[183] In the East China Sea, China routinely challenges Japanese territorial claims.[184] On land, China has border disputes with India (the most volatile), Bhutan, and Nepal, and ongoing issues with Russia and North Korea.

Further instability is created by the potential for miscalculation from provocations involving space and offensive cyber operations that could trigger terrestrial conflicts.

Military Tools for Escalation Management

Varied military capabilities are essential to credible escalation management. Within the Indo-Pacific, diplomacy on nuclear issues is largely bilateral and at different states of operational maturity and strategic depth across key nations. There is no NATO-like collective security organization that can accommodate multilateral political and military deterrence discussions or that is able to facilitate enhanced multilateral military cooperation for strategic deterrence purposes. Moreover, the emergence of any institutionalized formal structure that operates like NATO is highly improbable. There are, however, opportunities for politico-military initiatives and activities involving multiple regional actors. Collaborative actions can be convened as track 1, 1.5, or 2 activities to share perceptions and engage common national interests. These can drive enhanced cooperation on military force structure, posture, training, and equipping to better optimize collective regional integrated deterrence.

The military tools best placed to play a role in strategic deterrence in the Indo-Pacific include the U.S. nuclear triad of weapons and delivery systems. Though nuclear weapons are a necessary part of any calibrated and integrated military deterrence strategy, they are not alone in their ability to give effect to strategic deterrence in 2025. Space, cyber, and undersea military capabilities offer dual-use growth paths for U.S.-led regional cooperation and should be a key focus given their prioritization within Chinese strategy and military writings. Various regional countries have specific strengths in military technologies operationally relevant for Indo-Pacific contingencies. Leveraging these appropriately into coordinated theater planning by regional allied militaries can have a positive effect on assurance and deterrence credibility.

Dispersed conventional long-range, standoff, and precision-strike missiles located within credible geographic ranges of key targets would signal a nascent combined capability with significant opportunities for rapid growth through collaborative capability codevelopment and coproduction, enabling manufacturing and maintenance across the theater. U.S. and allied forces can coordinate to affect a balance of offensive and defensive systems. Current technological advances are driving a new range of capabilities that support the integrated air and missile defense mission. The 2025 Exercise Talisman Saber, hosted by Australia and partner nations in the Indo-Pacific, provides a recent example of a combined capability demonstration. As one news organization described the exercise:

> U.S. Marine Corps F-35Bs opened the scenario with airstrikes, followed by coordinated HIMARS strikes using shared multinational ISR data. Australian, U.S., and Singaporean forces worked side-by-side to deliver precision fires . . . Japan's CHU-SAM system provided rear-area air defense.
>
> The demonstration validated the ability of like-minded nations to rapidly converge targeting data, adapt to each other's systems, and operate as a unified force, highlighting both regional deterrence and the increasing modernization of the Australian Defence Force.[185]

Certain new technologies have unique advanced military applications within the space and cyber domains. Many of these technologies are being developed and financed in the private sector. As these tools are ultimately tested and brought into military service, existing guardrails such as rules

and norms of acceptable behavior are bending. So-called gray zone warfare in cyberspace and space could rapidly escalate from background noise to open conflict.

A noteworthy example of how these newer domains and emerging technologies are changing traditional operational thinking is the relatively recent debate about a new "strategic triad" of space, cyber, and special operations. Per U.S. Special Operations Command,

> The SOF [Special Operations Forces]-Space-Cyber triad represents a powerful convergence and synergy in modern warfare, combining the unique capabilities of special operations forces, space assets, and cyber operations. This integration enables on-the-ground intelligence, access, global communication, surveillance, information warfare, and network disruption. Together, these elements create a force multiplier factor that enable[s] the Joint Force to conduct operations with reduced risk of escalation.[186]

This debate offers a further lens on the specific roles of these forces and capabilities in an Indo-Pacific escalation management approach. The geography of this region is challenging. It is expansive, maritime, archipelagic, and littoral.

> This triad [SOF-space-cyber] is an evolving model that addresses emerging challenges. It aims to inspire similarly deep strategic thought and complement all U.S. war-making and deterrence methods by introducing pioneering strategies that leverage modern information technology—from the ground to orbital planes. Doing so provides the joint force with enhanced tools and offers policymakers greater flexibility.[187]

Integrating these new capabilities and operational models with whole-of-government approaches supports the most effective deployment of the full deterrence tool kit. The effective use of nonmilitary and irregular warfare domains to disrupt, distract, and compete as part of a coherent strategy reinforces conventional military tools and supports deterrence credibility.

Risk-Reduction Tools for Escalation Management

Escalation is conceptualized differently in China than it is in Western military thought. Understanding the adversary and its approach to escalation is the necessary starting point for considering counter, opposing, or alternative strategies. Within an excellent compilation of essays on Chinese military decisionmaking in crisis and conflict, David Santoro makes a vital point that has fundamental implications for U.S. and partner considerations of escalation, and of de-escalation and risk reduction:

> Beijing believes that it can benefit from escalation, due to a deep-seated belief that it can readily control military crises, conflicts, and even wars. The one exception is the use of nuclear weapons. Beijing does not think that nuclear escalation would be controlled in a crisis or armed conflict between the U.S. and China, or any other powers.[188]

In exploring questions of escalation and strategic deterrence with China, policymakers in Washington, Canberra, Seoul, and Tokyo must contend with a knowledge and intelligence deficit. Decisions are made within a highly constructed, contested, and manipulated information

environment. The sophisticated space and cyber assets of the United States, its partners, and its allies can and do contribute critical intelligence through satellite intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; cyber espionage; and traditional intelligence collection means. Human intelligence is extraordinarily challenging in China's closed and controlled environment. In addition, the CCP has established coercive reach into diaspora communities globally. This creates a demanding intelligence problem, but not an impossible one. Human intelligence is a key area where alliances contribute value and open options.

Actions in information and intelligence domains often do not yield visible or immediate results, making their use in an integrated campaign a challenge for policymakers. Carefully calibrated offensive cyber activities designed to undermine the CCP's confidence in its own capacity to control and secure information in a crisis may introduce doubt and support deterrence, but may also be so sensitive as to unwittingly provoke a surprisingly strong escalation in response. Xi's tolerance for absorbing probes and challenges, especially in the information domains, cannot be known with confidence. His focus and reliance on information technologies and information capabilities for warfare strongly indicate, however, that this area should remain a top intelligence priority for the United States and its allies.

Intelligence-led policy and operations have been long-standing enablers of the operations of Western powers over the last century. The Five Eyes arrangement involving Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States has underpinned some of the most globally relevant and capable action among its intelligence and military partners since its formal establishment in 1946.[189]

The United States and its allies should leverage existing high-level collaborative forums to increase war-gaming, calibrate strategies, and develop plausible courses of collective action. Chinese writings and PLA strategy are acutely focused on how, where, and what information flows globally concerning U.S. military or supporting civilian operations. Information architecture and information platforms are key targets for disruption, manipulation, contamination, and dominance in any crisis contingency. Addressing this perceived weakness in U.S. and allied systems would likely assist in reducing the risk of Chinese continued escalation in the cyber domain.

PLA operational concepts seek to deny or degrade U.S. information and intelligence technology and capability strengths, including in the space and cyber domains, where China believes it can control escalation. Options for de-escalation through military, diplomatic, and other nonmilitary means—while implausible in the current moment—should continue to be actively pursued.

Dialogue and diplomacy are constant companions of military activity. The absence of a meaningful, practiced, and trustworthy means to communicate during escalations, incidents, and crises is a serious escalation risk itself. Despite being consistently rebuffed, the United States should continue to extend the invitation to the PLA to establish such communications as a responsible act. China's continued refusal to participate in developing risk-reduction mechanisms poses a greater reputational risk to China than to the United States.

Risk-reduction efforts are a core element of the full-spectrum, integrated deterrence tool kit. Alongside military activities across the peacetime-to-conventional-and-possible-nuclear war continuum, the goal of risk-reduction activities is to convince Xi Jinping that "today is not the day" to take on the United States and its allies in a military confrontation in the Indo-Pacific.

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