Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

"China's Power: Up for Debate 2026
Debate I: As China's Power Grows It Will Be More Willing to Militarily Support and Defend Its Closest International Friends"

DATE

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FEATURING

Michael Swaine

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CSIS EXPERTS

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Bonny Lin: So I'm very delighted to introduce two excellent speakers to debate this topic related to China's military power. So the topic we will be debating today is, "As China's Power Grows It Will Be More Willing to Militarily Support and Defend Its Closest International Friends."

Debating for this proposition is Brian Hart, to my left. Brian is my deputy director and fellow of the China Power Project, at – actually, senior fellow now – at the Center for Strategic International Relations – sorry – Center for Strategic International Studies, not relations. He also helps to lead Hidden Reach, a CSIS special initiative that shines light on underappreciated sources of China's influence through open-source data and satellite imagery. So he'll be arguing to defend this proposition.

Against this proposition is Michael Swaine. He is a senior research fellow in the Quincy Institute's East Asia Program. Formerly at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, he worked for nearly 20 years as a senior fellow specializing in China's defense and foreign policy, U.S.-China relations, and East Asian international relations. Before that, he was a senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation. Michael also mentioned to me that he has two recent reports that might be of interest to folks at the conference. One was recently published on War on the Rocks, and it talks about how to conceptualize constructive strategic stability in terms of U.S.-China relations. And the second is a Quincy report, which looks at U.S.-China crisis management. And for folks who don't know Michael, he spent decades analyzing the topic of U.S.-China crisis management, so he is a leader in the field in that respect.

So before we start this debate, I'd like to ask folks to actually vote in terms of your own views of this topic. So if you agree or disagree with this proposition. So you can vote in two ways. This is an annual feature of our conference. We see how the audience feels before the debate, and then we have another vote at the end. The votes don't necessarily mean one debater is better than the other, but it just showcases how the different arguments may have impacted people's thoughts on this topic. For those who are able to scan the QR code, that's the easiest. If you can't scan it, you can also go online to pollev.com/ccsis/099. And if you have any questions or have any problems voting please feel free to raise your hand, and one of our team members will come over and help you. So let's give folks a minute.

(Pause.)

OK. It seems to me the results are almost stabilizing. Oh, a little bit. They're still changing. OK. Yeah, we're good. It's almost equal. It does seem Michael might have an easier argument to make, or at least your view is more supported by the audience right now. So with that, let me turn the floor first

to Brian to make the case, and then for Michael to argue why that is not true. Please, Brian, over to you.

Brian Hart: Well, thanks, Bonny. It's great to be here. You know, I've been part of the China Power team for, I think, eight years – seven, eight years now. So I've been to a lot of these conferences. So it's great to be here. I guess I have my work cut out for me, both given that everybody, you know, already is kind of leaning towards Michael's side, and I know Michael is going to give a fierce debate here, but I'll kind of lay out where I'm going to go with this.

So, first, I think a couple of definitions are really important here to kind of set the stage – definitions and assumptions. So first off is, you know, the key word here is military support – "militarily support and defend." I think I'm going to take a fairly broad definition of what that means. And so I would define this as including a range of activities that China could take to support partners, starting from, you know, intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, transfers of dual-use technologies, transfers of military equipment, and then, on the highest end of that, you know, direct intervention of PLA forces to defend other countries. And I'll start off by saying that, you know, I think China has a clear historic track record of not intervening its military forces directly to support other countries. It hasn't really done that since the Korean War. So I think that that remains on the most unlikely end of this. But I'll show how I think broadly China is going to be incentivized to increase its military support for partners.

So, you know, just for some background, I would say that, you know, taking this broad definition that I've laid out for military activities, I think there's already clear evidence that China's support for its partners is already increasing. I think there's many examples of this, but I would highlight, you know, some of the work that we did here at CSIS last year looking at China's security cooperation with what we at CSIS call CRINK – you know, China, Russia, Iran, North Korea. And I think this is well documented and it remains something that's in the media, but, you know, just a few highlights.

China has been, you know, absolutely critical to Russia's ability to sustain its war in Ukraine by providing dual-use goods, especially, you know, precision machine goods to help keep Russia's defense industry going. The provision of drone parts. I would also argue that China has been increasing, since the start of the war in Iran – the war in Ukraine, some military signaling activities with Russia, through joint military exercises. They reached a peak in 2024 of joint military exercises. And we've seen them increase that cooperation to, I think, more pointedly deter – you know, signal to the United States, including activities like joint aerial patrols that, you know, approach the Alaska ADIZ, and things like that. So more cooperation there after the start of the war in Ukraine.

On Iran, you know, again, quickly just to touch on this, China has provided ballistic missile fuels, drone parts, and also satellite imagery and intelligence, which reported in recent weeks has been involved in supporting Iran's attacks on U.S. forces. So I think there's a clear baseline to show that China is doing this. It's not taking the – you know, crossing Rubicon to provide direct lethal aid to these countries during their conflicts, but it has done quite a lot to step up and support those countries.

But that's not necessarily what we're here to argue. We're here to argue whether this will increase going forward. So I would argue that there are three reasons why Beijing will be increasingly willing to support its partners militarily. The first is just China's military power is growing and going to continue to grow, barring a major shock. And I think that that opens up just the options that China has at its disposal. Second, shifts in China's strategic and political thinking, I think, are opening the aperture for Beijing's willingness. And I'll go into some of the reasons there. And then third, this one is a little bit outside the scope of this proposition, but I would argue that the key trends in the international system right now towards more multipolarity and greater anarchy are increasing the demands from China's partners for support. And I think also trends in technology are lowering the cost for China to provide meaningful military support.

So, again, to go forward with each of these, the first is, again, China's military power is growing. I don't think this is a secret to anybody. I think if you look at where China is today, or where it's come – so if you look back to 2000, for example, China's defense spending then was around $42 billion, adjusted for inflation, and it was the second-largest spender on the military in the Indo-Pacific, behind Japan. Today China spends more than eight times that amount, and it spends more than the next twenty-two Indo-Pacific countries combined. So the balance of power in the region has shifted fundamentally over the last few decades. And that has increased the capabilities that China has at its disposal to project power.

I would argue that right now China still has limited conventional capabilities to project power, but the trend lines are clear as to where it's going. And I think one anecdotal piece of evidence of that is China's build out of its navy, specifically its development of a more blue-water navy with aircraft carriers. So just this week my colleagues and I here at CSIS released updated satellite imagery of China's construction of its fourth aircraft carrier, which we assess is likely to be nuclear powered.

The Defense Department assesses that China could build up to nine aircraft carriers – or, field a nine aircraft carrier fleet by 2035. That would mark a fundamental, I think, sea change in China's ability to project power globally. So I think if we do see that large of a kind of a blue-water navy emerge, it's a clear – the clearest signal we have yet that Beijing's ambitions are moving

beyond just its immediate periphery, you know, its borders, its – the East China Sea, Taiwan, South China Sea – towards a more global footprint.

I think the timing matters here too. I would just make a couple last points on this before moving on. You know, China has a clear timeline for military modernization. So it has a goal for 2035 to achieve the basic modernization – complete basic modernization of the PLA. And by midcentury to be a world-class military power, which I would argue is essentially meaning on par with the United States.

So I think as China becomes more confident in its capabilities, as it – you know, if and when it achieves these milestones, and feels more safe at home and in its immediate periphery, that reduces the barriers for China to project power more abroad. One point on that too is I think there will be incentives here as China's military matures for it to increase arms transfers and technology transfers. Because right now, the vast majority of its domestic defense industry has been focused on supporting the PLA. I think, you know, this is a classic defense industrial complex argument. As China's own internal demands for the pace modernization slows, I think that creates new incentives for China's defense industry to go global.

Moving on to the second core point is that I would argue China's strategic thinking has shifted really meaningfully under Xi Jinping. This shift maybe even predates Xi Jinping, but I think it has really intensified under him. If you go back to the days of Deng Xiaoping and, you know, hide and bide strategy, "tao guang yang hui," you know China needs to – because of its limited capabilities – to wait until its strengths are greater before it plays a greater role. I would argue that under Xi Jinping we have seen that shift start to happen. And really one of the critical things that has become popular in Beijing, I think, internally, is this notion that the East is rising and the West is declining. This is something that we've heard Xi Jinping say repeatedly, and I think really is kind of the core mentality within China's political system right now that is – encapsulate a lot of the confidence that they have, as China's comprehensive national power has grown.

And I would argue, you know, this increases their willingness to act. And one example of this outside of the military context is China has, I think, done quite a transformation when it comes to using things like export controls and economic statecraft. You know, years ago, China was – Xi Jinping was decrying U.S. export controls as long-arm jurisdiction. But fast-forward to recent years and China has essentially, in many ways, adopted key elements of U.S. export control approaches as its own tool for power.

And on the military front, I would argue we are already starting to see some Chinese scholars within China's system argue that China does need to do more to support its partners. So, you know, one example of this is the

Chinese scholar Jin Canrong, who has written, after U.S. interventions in Venezuela over the last year, you know, argued that essentially China will struggle to win genuine friends, especially in the Global South, if it cannot support its friends beyond economic engagements. You know, this idea that some support of – some form of security support and assurances are needed if Beijing is to really deepen its support for its allies. You know, that's one scholar. That's not representative of, you know, Beijing's official thinking. But I think it gets to this point that these dynamics are being considered.

And then last – you know, last point, again, is these shifts in international system and technology that I think increase the opportunities for China to support its partners and potentially lower the cost. So, first, you know, I think the last couple of years have shown very clearly that the international system is becoming more anarchic, more multipolar, and the rise of – there's a rising number of conflicts – in Ukraine, in the Middle East, in Venezuela. So I think this increases the demands. We've already seen this increase the demands from China's partners, like Russia and Iran, for China to provide support to them. I think that, you know, going forward that's something we'll continue to see.

I think also implicit in my assumptions here is I anticipate continued competition, likely intensified competition, with the United States. So we can get into that more, but I would expect that, you know, as competition with the U.S. and China, you know, increases going forward, I think that that, again, raises the likelihood that China takes more actions to support its partners and to oppose the United States on the world stage.

And then, lastly, on the technology front, I think there's a clear shift – a clear change in the way that we conduct modern warfare, with a trend towards incorporating artificial intelligence and autonomous systems. This has been pivotal, obviously, in Ukraine, also in the war in Iran. China is watching this closely. What I would argue is that this is a clear area where China has a lot of capability on the technological front. China is a global leader in drone technologies, in particular.

You know, the importance – the growing importance of these, I think, offers opportunities for China to increasingly provide this kind of support to partners in ways that really meaningfully supports their ability to defend themselves and to potentially even project power, while still allowing China some deniability or, you know, the ability – or, you know, to be able to make the claim that it's not providing lethal support. Essentially, I would expect an intensification of what we've already seen China do with its partners like Russia and Iran.

I've probably gone on longer than I was supposed to. So with that, I'll turn it over to Michael, and look forward to debating more.

Dr. Lin: Great. Thank you, Brian. I think Brian has showed us the best way to defend an argument is to first define it the way that you like. (Laughter.) I will note that it seems, Brian, and please correct me if I misinterpret, you are supporting the argument that as China's power grows it will be more willing to militarily support its closest international friends, not defend.

Mr. Hart: Yeah. I think – you know, the idea that China is going to directly intervene with its own forces to support its partners, I think, remains limited. I think the pressures to do something like that might grow in the long term. But I think right now the most important things is China's ability to provide support below that threshold is very likely to increase, I think already is. But I think the aperture of opportunities China has, I think, across the board is growing.

Dr. Lin: Mmm hmm. Great. Thank you, Brian.

Michael, over to you.

Michael Swaine: Great. Thank you. It's great to be here today. Whoops. I'll say it again. Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here today.

The proposition you have to really read carefully: As China's power grows it will be more willing to militarily support and defend its closest international friends. So it states that China would not only just support, but also defend. So the question there is, you know, is this something that you can expect in both cases? Taken as a whole, I oppose this proposition because my disagreement concerns the relationship, really, between power and policy. Because the link here is to capabilities. As China's power grows, it will be more likely to support and defend. A stronger China will no doubt have more military options, but whether Beijing becomes more willing to use them for a partner depends on the interests at stake, the alternatives available, and the risks of escalation.

Growing strength changes that calculation, but it does not necessarily move it toward intervention. Let me acknowledge that what I think is Brian's strongest argument, greater capabilities can lower the costs of military action and improve China's prospects of success. Better intelligence, logistics, military power projection could make protective deployments or limited air defense missions more attractive. Nor must China become an American-style treaty ally to undertake such actions. Informal commitments and selective operations can contribute substantially to a friend's defense. I accept all of that. I also recognize that the proposition predicts greater

willingness, not automatic intervention or an unconditional defense guarantee.

The question is whether greater power will make China more willing to undertake direct military commitments to not only support but also defend its closest friends, rather than chiefly better able to carry out assistance it already considers worthwhile, aside from capabilities. Now there are several reasons to doubt this expectation. First, greater power improves the alternatives to intervention, as well as intervention itself. More effective weapons, intelligence, industrial support, and economic leverage can help Beijing prevent a partner's defeat without assuming responsibility for directly managing or participating in its war. If those measures achieve China's objectives at lower cost, greater capability may strengthen the case for relying on them.

Secondly, more operational confidence does not resolve the political problem of escalation. China might become better able to deploy an air defense unit, escort shipping, or protect a military facility. But whether that mission remains limited also depends on the adversary's response and the partner's conduct. Beijing must consider what it would do if Chinese personnel were attacked, the initial deployment proved inadequate, or the partner pursued objectives that China did not share.

Third, a more powerful China very likely has more interests to protect, including interests that direct intervention could endanger. Greater PRC influence in the Middle East, for example, could increase Beijing's concern for Iran's security, yes, while also increasing the value of relationships with Iran's rivals. Expanding capabilities and interests create competing obligations and incentives, not simply additional reasons to fight. The contemporary examples illustrate these choices. China's support – and Brian has mentioned them, China's support for Russia's defense industry has been consequential enough for NATO to call Beijing a "decisive enabler" of Russians' war. And the disputed reporting on Chinese air defense sales to Iran, which is in dispute, likewise concerns potentially important military assistance.

Neither case, however, establishes how Beijing would respond to the different and much more demanding contingency of a partner facing destruction or a major defeat. History establishes that China can accept those demands without being extremely powerful abroad. Take the case of a weaker China than today intervening in Korea in 1950, and sent support forces, including air defense units, that fought American aircraft in Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s. Beijing's '97 attack on Vietnam also demonstrates a willingness to use force in circumstances involving a threatened partner and wider strategic rivalry. These episodes suggest that perceived security states

can outweigh – security stakes can outweigh material weakness, not that increasing strength produces a steadily greater inclination to intervene.

We should also be equally careful about drawing the opposite conclusion from past restraint by China. Pakistan's crises with India, for example, where China exhibited some considerable restraint, cannot establish how China would behave in every future confrontation. The cases differ too much to provide a simple historical trend. Their value is in identifying the circumstances that drive decisions – geography, the nature of the threat, the partner's behavior, and the overall consequences for China itself.

That brings me to what I think is probably the strongest case for Brian, which is surely Beijing would become more willing to act if the survival of a truly essential partner were threatened. Possibly. The collapse of North Korea or a catastrophic defeat of Russia could create security consequences Beijing might judge intolerable. My argument does not require China to stand aside in those circumstances. It requires us to distinguish the importance of the contingency from the effect of growing power.

To put simply, a government can be willing to fight despite weakness when it considers the stakes vital, and remain unwilling to fight despite strength when it considers the costs excessive. Greater capability could change the decision in this regard at the margin, but to predict that change we need to explain which previously unacceptable operation becomes acceptable under greater capabilities, and why. Naming a vital partner identifies a powerful motive for intervention. It does not establish how much China's growing strength independently changes its willingness to intervene on behalf of that partner.

Now, what about deterrence through Chinese exercises, patrols, and limited deployments? These can help defend a partner. And I would not dismiss them merely because no fighting occurs. Their significance depends on the commitment they convey. An exercise demonstrates cooperation, but a deployment that Beijing intends to maintain under attack may imply a much greater undertaking. We should assess the actual exposure and obligations involved, rather than treat every expansion of military cooperation as evidence of the same underlying policy shift towards intervention.

Nor must involvement occur in one dramatic decision. I concede that advisors, intelligence support, and protective forces could draw China progressively deeper into a conflict. That is a plausible pathway. But it's also a foreseeable danger that gives Beijing reasons to limit missions and retain control over further commitments. Incremental involvement is a possibility to examine, not an inevitable consequence of greater capability.

Finally, sharper competition within the United States could make China's friends more valuable strategically, for sure. Yet it could also make their conflicts more dangerous by increasing the likelihood of a Chinese confrontation with Washington or other powers. The desire to prevent strategic isolation may encourage – on the part of China or its allies or friends – may encourage greater support, while the danger of a wider war, in those circumstances, might restrain any direct defense. Both effects need to be in the assessment.

My expectation, therefore, is that Beijing will seek stronger partners while continuing to judge military commitments selectively. I agree with Brian that we should guard against mirror imaging, assuming that as China acquires capabilities comparable to America's it will adopt similar commitments and judge its credibility by similar standards. American decisions about defending its allies reflect specific treaty obligations, established military arrangements, and decades of assurances, formal treaty assurances.

Greater Chinese power does not, by itself, reproduce those commitments or the reputational stakes attached to them. Beijing's credibility can rest on delivering the assistance it promises without treating every close partner's defense is a test of its reliability, with that partner or elsewhere. The affirmative stance for the proposition has identified a real enabling condition, greater power makes more military action possible. What remains unproven is the predicted direction of policy after we account for stronger alternatives, competing interests, and escalation risks.

So, to sum up, a stronger China might intervene in particular cases, but I expect its growing capability is chiefly to expand the assistance it can provide within limits set by its security interests and concerns about escalation. Stronger alternatives to intervention, competing relationships, and the danger of assuming responsibility for a partner's choices give Beijing substantial reasons to preserve those limits. On balance, I expect more effective military support, but continued selectivity about undertaking a partner's defense. That's why I oppose the proposition as stated. Thank you.

Dr. Lin: Thank you, Michael. It actually sounds like, given how Brian focused on support and you differentiate also between support and defend, that the two of you are actually much closer than initially how I thought that you – the two of you would come out.

One quick clarification question before I turn to Brian for rebuttals. Yesterday we had quite a bit of discussion among two twin panels on what is actually the current state and trajectory of China's growth. And Brian, in his opening comments, made the case that China's power is growing. Michael, can I just ask you, is that also your view of the current trajectory, that China's

power is still growing? Just to baseline the conversation. So, like, are we actually talking about the future, or are we talking about hypotheticals?

Dr. Swaine: Whether China's power is growing?

Dr. Lin: Yes. One of one of our panelists yesterday said that China's power has peaked already.

Dr. Swaine: Peaked?

Dr. Lin: Yes. OK, so you don't agree. (Laughter.) So I'm just – I'm trying to get the –

Dr. Swaine: What was the evidence for that?

Dr. Lin: I'm just trying to get the baseline of –

Dr. Swaine: Yeah, I see no – I see no evidence that China's power has actually peaked

Dr. Lin: OK.

Dr. Swaine: I mean, China is still spending a significant amount of money on defense. It has pegged its defense to GDP size for years and years and years. And as its economy has grown, that number has increased. It's been roughly 2 percent, or a little bit under, of GDP. And as far as I know, that still continues. And China still continues to produce a lot of military capabilities, military weapon systems, training them, et cetera. So I would not say that it's peaked. I'd like to hear the argument. I don't understand why it's peaked. (Laughter.)

Dr. Lin: Well, I will introduce you to him afterwards. (Laughter.) But, basically, it seems like the two of you are on the same page in terms of – you're talking about this proposition as a potential future for China, because China's power is continuing to grow.

Dr. Swaine: I should say the one more debatable, contestable question is, has the increase in Chinese power increased its power relative to the United States, and relative to U.S. allies alongside the United States, particularly in Asia? That kind of an argument is less clear. I think there's a debate about that. My own impression is that around Taiwan, and in that vicinity along China's periphery, close in along China's periphery, that Chinese capabilities are growing relative to those of the U.S. And that's what creates – at least, is one factor that creates a situation regarding Taiwan that is increasingly dangerous over time.

Dr. Lin: Perfect. Thank you, Michael.

Let me now turn the floor to Brian for your rebuttals, and then, Michael, for your final words.

Mr. Hart: Yeah. Well –

Dr. Swaine: We agree. You have no rebuttal. (Laughter.)

Mr. Hart: So, just on Bonny's point, I think it is important to emphasize that the military power – I think the arguments about China's power peaking often are derived from – or, based on the economic focus, that China's GDP is slowing, or maybe, you know, I've seen even some say it's negative. Even if that was the case, I expect China's defense – you know, defense spending and military power to continue to grow in the near future, and really in the long term, even if China's economy stagnates. So that's just kind of my personal assumption. But I do think that that matters, because that was reflective in how I kind of framed this.

But, starting to the rebuttals, I think Michael laid out a lot of really good points. And one of the things that I think I forgot to say up front is that it is very clear – it's really important that we don't mirror-image U.S. thinking onto China. I think China has a clear strategic culture and decision making that is different from the United States, in terms of how they think about partnerships with other countries. I mean, you frequently hear Chinese officials use the phrase "partnerships not alliances." China's only official treaty ally still remains North Korea. And we haven't seen – I have seen no evidence that China is shifting towards a more formal alliance system.

I don't think that that precludes, you know, the option that China can strengthen security support for countries, you know, without an alliance. In fact, I think that that's what we're likely to see. I think China really values strategic flexibility in its partnerships with countries. Iran is a good example. Yes, China does want to support Iran, but it also has clear interest in not upsetting its partnerships with countries like Saudi Arabia, and the region. So it is a – I will fully acknowledge that I don't expect that to change. I think that's deeply ingrained.

So where I think you disagree with me most is – if I understand your argument – is that, yes, China's power is growing, but does that increase Beijing's willingness? That's the key operative issue here. And so for me, I would point to two pieces of evidence that China's willingness to use its military as a tool is growing – or one piece of evidence there. I think we've seen, as China's military power has grown, a greater willingness to use it as more of a first response. Not to support its partners, I'll concede that, but on the issue of Taiwan I think it's very clear that when China sees Taiwan or the United States taking actions that it perceives as problematic, China's often response is to – is to rely on the military.

We've seen this with repeated large-scale military exercises around Taiwan, which I think have – you know, since 2022 when those really began, have shifted Beijing's kind of posture and footprint around Taiwan meaningfully. And I would even go back to – I recall a foreign ministry spokesperson session with the media where former spokesperson Hua Chunying said, yes, China is increasingly relying on the PLA to signal on Taiwan, because that's what they view as being most – getting the signal clearly across to the United States.

So I think that this suggests a greater willingness to use the PLA in more escalatory ways. I think that they've chosen to stay below a clear – a threshold with the United States. I don't think they want to – you know, they obviously don't want to start a conflict with the United States. But I think their willingness to use the PLA to signal and to – as a tool of statecraft, I think, has meaningfully shifted. And I think that we – you know, that that is something that could appear more and more in terms of China's partnerships.

I think one other – one other important here too is you made a – you made a good point, which is, I think, one of the more compelling counter arguments, is that, you know, China has stakes overseas. And so if it picks sides, if it supports a partner militarily, that obviously has implications for China's growing interests around the world. I think a counterargument to that – I agree with that right now. But I think a counter argument to that is Xi Jinping has a clear – I would argue, a clear obsession with China's self-reliance. I mean, he is trying to build up China's ability to withstand external pressure, and to have its own tools for external pressure. So China's, you know, indigenizing supply chains across the board is a key focus for China. And it's something that I think they're doubling down on under the 15th five-year plan.

And so, to me, if China continues along this path towards what is essentially, you know, closer to a more autarkic model – China is never going to be autarkic – but that's the – you know, that's the direction China, I think, is trying to move on under Xi Jinping. I think as that happens, as China does, you know, reduce its exposure to foreign influence and foreign interference on the economic front, I think that that also reduces some of the stakes for China, and frees up space – maybe lowers the cost for Xi and Beijing to make these kind of decisions that might be more forward-leaning on the military side. So with that, I'll wrap up.

Dr. Lin: Great. Thank you.

Let me turn to Michael, and then I have a couple of questions for each of you before we open it up to folks in the audience.

Dr. Swaine: OK. I think one thing we have to hold clear here in assessing all of this is that the proposition is talking about China's willingness to support and defend its closest international friends. That's the issue. And that – and the implication here is that as China's power grows, it will begin to behave in ways as a protecting mentor over other countries, take on responsibilities for their defense, because it sees them as valuable to its own interests in various ways.

The proposition is not, as China's military capabilities grow it will be more inclined to use its military capabilities. That's obvious. It will use its military capabilities in a whole variety of different ways. And we've seen already what they are. And those military capabilities include efforts that one could argue are intimidation towards Taiwan, towards countries in the South China Sea, efforts to use its military to convey resolve on issues unrelated to its international friends. So I completely concede the idea that China is willing to use more military force in various ways, both direct combat and indirect combat, for a variety of other issues. I mean, it's a growing power. It has more military options. And it could very likely do those.

But even under those conditions, it still has to face the kinds of contingencies, the kinds of concerns about escalation, the kinds of concerns about confronting the United States, even if it's much more powerful, because the United States is no pushover. The United States still has enormous capabilities. It still has to consider blowback. And it still has to consider the behavior of other countries, not just its friends but other countries, when it uses force. And its international reputation, which is a big issue of concern for the Chinese.

They see themselves as a peace-loving country that doesn't resort to force very much. You know, you look at China's history, that's nonsense. Nonetheless, they try to establish – Xi Jinping says, we have a gene of peace in the Chinese people. I mean, it's all baloney. The Chinese have resorted to force in many cases in their history when they've had to. They've done it when they're weak. They've done it when they're strong. So you have to look at the specific context, the contingency, and then you have to say, OK, what is related to the proposition itself? And on that score, I don't necessarily think that growing Chinese capabilities is the primary independent variable that is going to dictate and predict for you whether or not China is going to come to the defense of one of its allies.

I just think the number of other intervening variables are so important, so critical for China, that it must consider those other variables, and would not necessarily come to – come to the defense of its friends, even its closest friends. Even on North Korea, China has taken a very ambivalent attitude,

because of North Korea's nuclear program. It has sanctioned North Korea. It has tried to restrain North Korea in various ways. Now if North Korea were attacked and seemed to be going under, and it was an existential threat to North Korea, that would place enormous pressure on China, for sure. But much would depend on the circumstances. Much would depend on what led to the war, whose actions provoked the war, or were seen as provoking the war by Beijing.

And if North Korea were seen as provoking the war, and the U.S. and South Korea reacted in ways that were detrimental to North Korea but didn't necessarily determine for sure that it would – that it would eliminate the North Korean state, the Chinese might be very careful about how they reacted in that situation. So it's all really – you can summarize my rebuttal down to the fact that, while I agree with Brian on the fact that China is likely to use growing capabilities to increase its ability to support – and its actual use of military capabilities to support in various ways its international friends through both military and non-military ways, gray zone ways as well as direct military ways, that is a very different situation from assuming that China will use growing capabilities as the critical factor that will lead them to use military force in support of its friends, and get embroiled in everything of what that means.

Dr. Lin: Great. Thank you.

A couple of questions before we go back to voting. And hopefully this doesn't show my hand too much in terms of where my views stand on this. So, Michael, you provided a very persuasive case of why China is operating differently from the United States and how we treat our allies and partners. If you had to summarize, like, the two or three reasons why – and I know you've already done this in the past, like, 30 or so minutes. What is the top reason of why China thinks about alliances so differently than the United States?

Dr. Swaine: What? Say that again?

Dr. Lin: What is the top reason, in your perspective, of why China thinks about commitments to friends so differently than the United States? Because you mentioned a whole range of factors earlier. What is the main – what is the main driving difference, from your perspective, in China's perception of its alliances compared to ours? Is it the – sorry, go ahead.

Dr. Swaine: Yeah. I think it's – I mean, there are a whole host of reasons. Some of them are historical and some of them have to do with Chinese attitudes about getting embroiled in foreign wars and taking on foreign responsibilities. You know, the United States emerged with its relationship with its allies in a very unique environment after World War II. It took on enormous

responsibilities. And it had military forces around the world that were positioned around the world as a result of the Second World War. They had forces in Japan. They had forces in Europe. And they decided to maintain those forces because of the rise of communism, as it was seen, and to try to prevent a dominant aggressive power from overtaking Europe or overtaking Asia.

So you had, until this very day, U.S. bases in Japan and South Korea, you know it. China has never had that experience. China has never had that perceived need to have to take on that level of global responsibility to prevent foreign powers from taking over particular regions. Now, could they acquire that capability in the future? I suppose they could, if they thought the stakes were sufficiently high that required them to play that unique role that the United States has played. But they simply haven't accepted that kind of an argument thus far, as far as we can tell. They believe that you need to have balance of power, you need to have a greater balance.

In part, they want to erode the American predominance, American superiority. So they want to have a greater balance of power through a multipolar kind of an environment. And that doesn't really play to a kind of dominant, based on allies, basing around the world idea of a superior balance of power, which is the way the United States always frames it. It's much more oriented towards balancing in a genuine sense, as far as the Chinese are concerned, with very selective adaptation of force where they think it directly impugns their interests or their reputation. And I think that's the critical differences.

Dr. Lin: Thank you.

And then, Brian, for you, in your opening comments you made three reasons for why Beijing might support its military partners more. And I think the last reason, of what you characterized in terms of the shifting international landscape, and you described it as more multipolar and more anarchy, more global conflicts elsewhere. And then you mentioned Jin Canrong and some of the other Chinese scholars who've been making the case that, how can China try to strive to lead in this international world if it doesn't defend some of its closest partners? And then I didn't see you bring that up in the rebuttal. (Laughter.)

So connecting that to what Michael mentioned in a second about – just a second ago, about, like, China's goals and responsibilities, do you generally agree with Michael that Beijing doesn't have those goals and responsibilities? And that's why, even if it is more anarchic, you might not necessarily see this wholesale defense – rather, defense of stronger, closer China's partners? Not necessarily all of them. I think neither you nor Michael believed that China will be defending partners across the board, but there might be more

selective defense of key partners. How do you – how do you basically square all the different factors?

Mr. Hart: Yeah. So I think implicit in kind of my worldview of – and, again, I would say a timeframe matters here. I think I'm taking quite a long view as to where I see this trajectory going, because what I see – I talked about China's military modernization goals. You know, by the midcentury China wants to be, what they call, a first-rate military power, on par with the United States. To me, that means I think China needs to have global capabilities. And I think that also means taking on more global responsibility. I don't think Beijing – again, this is where I got to the I think it's crucial to emphasize mirror imaging. I don't expect China to take the same approach that the United States has, with a global network of alliances, a global network of bases. That doesn't have to be what China's footprint and posture looks like globally in order for them to recognize that they have to take on more responsibility.

A key thing that I haven't really talked about yet is that this is something that we've been hearing from, I think, Chinese scholars, is China is really invested in the idea of leading the Global South, to be seen as kind of a vanguard of the Global South. With countries like Russia – powerful countries like Russia also playing an important there, but China singularly playing a leading role in the Global South, given that the United States and the West are kind of moving in the opposite direction. If that's the case, I just argue – and I think, again, we're starting to see Chinese scholars argue this – China just can't simply be seen as that global leader if the only public goods that it's really supplying are, you know, some moves on global governance and largely an economic approach.

I think in order for China to be seen as a global leader, it is going to have to take on a greater share of global security. And, again, I don't think that that means rushing to the aid of all of its partners around the world by, you know, inserting its own military forces. But I do think it means the stakes will be higher for China, the pressures on China to act with the military as a tool of power will rise in the long term, if China wants to take on this responsibility. And my assumption, based on the factors I've seen, is that is where, you know, Xi Jinping and, you know, the party want to go long term.

Dr. Lin: Thank you.

One final question for the two of you. The other factor I was wondering that may be shaping sort of both of your answers to this proposition is perhaps the nature and character of China's closest international friends, compared to U.S. international friends. From my perspective, it seems to me China's closest friends are more united in what they oppose than what they necessarily believe in. But to the extent – so I just wanted to turn to the two of you, maybe Michael first, on your thoughts of, like, could that change over

time? Like, could China have close friends, like United States has with some of our closest allies and partners? Or do you think that you don't necessarily see that in the future? And that's also partially why we're not seeing China being willing to defend its closest friends the same way, because they're not as like-minded as we are with some of our closest allies?

Dr. Swaine: I think it's probably doubtful that you will have China develop relationships with its most likely international friends that would have the level of confidence and mutual trust that, short of Donald Trump, we have seen historically in the U.S. relationship with its allies. These are – you know, these are democracies, many of which have been heavily influenced in their political makeup by the United States, and have a huge affinity and long-standing history of interaction, culturally, people-to-people, et cetera, with the United States. So the United States has strong identity with a lot of these countries. In the Chinese case, you really can't say that about Russia, for sure. It doesn't – you don't have to scratch very far a Chinese, or a Russian for that matter, to get expressions of deep suspicion about the other in the Sino-Russian relationship, based upon some very serious war that has occurred in the past, conflicts. So there's a great deal of suspicion at a certain level there.

And I think the same for – it's not the same with Iran. With Iran, it's more that Iran is just not simply as large and significant a power as Russia is. And Iran is one player among many in the Middle East that China wants to court. And Iran has difficult relations, to put it charitably, with many of those other countries, while China has good relations with them. So Iran is very in a compromise – is in a very compromised position to ensure Chinese support of the kind that the U.S. might give to Japan, let's say. And then North Korea is, to a certain degree, its own special case. North Korea becomes very important because of the history of the Korean War, and because of the geostrategic position of Korea on the peninsula, in relation to South Korea and Japan. And so China's perception and need to have North Korea serve as a kind of buffer in Northeast Asia is very strong.

But at the same time, I don't think there's a whole lot of love lost between the North Koreans and the Chinese. I think China regards North Korea as reckless. China sees North Korea as, in some ways, irresponsible. China (sic; North Korea) never adopted the reform path that China adopted towards opening up its economy to the outside world, developing, raising the standard of living of its people, doing all the things that China has done in the reform period. The North Koreans, by and large, pushed that off. And the Chinese don't like that. So the North Koreans are not seen as this really tight allied relationship. And the Chinese are somewhat equivocating when you talk to them about the Sino-Korean alliance. So I think it's a very different story in each one of these cases, so that you cannot expect that even as China's power grows it's going to establish the kind of commitment and

confidence in supporting its supposed friends and allies that you see in the U.S. case.

Mr. Hart: Yeah. I mean, I would very much agree with a lot of what Michael said on, you know, China's partnerships with Russia, Iran, North Korea. You know, in the work that we did last year on the CRINKs, we laid out a lot of those kind of drawbacks for China of working more with the CRINKs. I mean, there's the lack of trust. There's all of the things that Michael said. I think the natural differences in their political systems, things like that, do limit the kinds of partnerships I think China is just willing and able to have with these countries. I just don't see any scenario in which those partnerships, at least anytime soon, look anything like, you know, a U.S. treaty ally, like the kind of values-based, historic-based relationships we have with our closest allies.

I would say one of the things that we have – I think, in terms of framing this argument we kind of talked about China's partners as mostly being those CRINKs. I think that's kind of been where we've gravitated. I will say one thing that's worth considering is – and, actually, Michael, you did raise this a little bit in your comment – which is that a crucial thing which isn't baked into this proposition that matters very much is the stakes. So, you know, China intervened in the Korean War because it was on its doorstep and it had a natural, compelling interest in intervening, because it risked China's own security. I would say that there are – that is a factor. I know that that's outside of this proposition a bit, but I do think that that matters when you think about China's periphery.

I mean, China borders, I think, 14 countries, more than any other country in the world. Its strategic periphery is very dramatically different from the United States. And so that frames their strategic posture there. But I do think that matters, because if China does intervene to support a partner, it is, I would say, most likely to going to be on its own periphery. You know whether that's in Central Asia, Southeast Asia. You know, this is very much getting into hypotheticals, but, you know, China's past interventions have been when it has stakes on its immediate periphery – Korea, Vietnam. So I think if we were to see China intervene, it's not – probably not going to be across the world. It's going to be on its periphery, because the stakes are high. So I think the combination of, you know, the security stakes for China, coupled with their growing capability and, in my argument, a growing willingness to use military power, I think that that is the most likely combination I see in China using its military to support partners.

Dr. Lin: Yeah.

Go ahead.

Dr. Swaine: I should just add that, and I'm sure Brian doesn't disagree, just keep in mind what he just said. Countries along China's border have a strategic importance to China, right? And they've had a lot of bad relations with those countries. And they've gone to war with those countries at different times. So as their power grows, they might be more willing to counter those countries if they're seen as threatening them. But these calculations are bound up in a whole set of strategic assumptions, and strategic beliefs, and strategic conclusions that the Chinese would draw about risk, and about the blowback, and about the impact on other nations, and about China's reputation in the world, et cetera.

So when you put all those together, capabilities alone don't play a very important role, in my view. I think capabilities do make China more capable of acting, but that doesn't necessarily – even doesn't necessarily mean that China would therefore use military force against those countries. It could decide that other types of alternatives to that, other types of situations, are much more likely to defend its overall interests. So the capabilities issue is just one variable in that. The proposition defines the capabilities issue as the variable.

Dr. Lin: And, Michael, you also mentioned deterrence earlier. It's also possible that as China becomes much more powerful militarily, countries will be deterred in taking action against China. So China might not have to necessarily use force in the same way.

Dr. Swaine: Right. Right.

Dr. Lin: I did want to just quickly summarize what I'm hearing about the two different aspects of this proposition, the support and the defend. What I seem to be hearing from the two of you is China would probably be more willing to militarily support close friends in the future, because the cost of support is relatively low and the types of support we're talking about isn't sending lethal aid – sorry – sending Chinese troops to join the battle. But in terms of defend, you believe that would be much more selective, based on sort of political calculus, and probably, if you were to think about it, geographically more around China's periphery because that's much more core and at home to China. I didn't mean to get our two speakers into a consensus, but I do want to get questions from the audience. (Laughter.) Hopefully end up, you know, poking at the areas where they actually disagree. Please.

Audience Question: Thank you, Brian and Michael, for your fascinating discussion.

You know, I'm a China watcher based in Hong Kong. I just want to offer one comment and one question. The comment is, when we talk about whether China is more willing to militarily support and defend its closest

international friends, if you consider that China only has one military base overseas, and I'm not quite sure that if anything happens, you know, it's, like, after U.S. had Maduro abducted, I think there were lots of discussion in China about how China can protect its, you know, overseas investments along the Belt and Road Initiative. In fact, China can't. That's one comment I want to make.

The second, even in Pakistan, one of China's closest allies, China's investments are being attacked all the time, even being protected by the Pakistan Army. So what do you think of this idea of China, instead of sending its military to protect these investments, you know, what about China trying to build up some PMCs to protect? I mean, because even, you know, I'll use Pakistan as another example, which is this: Is that even in Pakistan, with the protection of the Pakistan military, China's investments have been attacked all the time. Thank you.

Dr. Swaine: PMCs?

Dr. Lin: So, just to clarify, PMC, private military companies, right?

Audience Question: OK.

Mr. Hart: I can take on a little bit of that. So on the first one, on China's global footprint, so, yes. So China has one officially recognized overseas base, in Djibouti. It has joint facilities with Cambodia and Laos. I would also add that it has, you know, military installations across the South China Sea for projecting power there. But, yes, China's global military footprint doesn't look anything like the United States, in terms of our global basing and posture. But I think there's clear reporting and evidence that China is interested in establishing some overseas – more overseas facilities. I think China hasn't made the progress yet on some of those fronts, but I think I anticipate China and the PLA will continue to move in that direction. Again, especially, as I said, as China builds out a more blue-water navy I think it is going to need more overseas basing access to project that power. I think China also has a much clearer past of using dual use. You know, basically China has a network of port access across the world. That's not the same as having overseas bases, but I think it is meaningful.

On the point about PMCs and private military companies, I think that's a good point. And actually, right now I think that's a lot of what we've seen, which is that China, rather than using the PLA as its primary tool for security cooperation, historically has used, you know, PMCs, but also domestic security. So I think Sheena Greitens and others have done a lot of work on this, in that whereas, you know, other powers, like Russia, use their military as a key player, China has leaned more on providing domestic security

provisions for those countries as a way to support them with domestic security. So I think that that is something we've seen China do in the past, and I expect that to continue. But, again, I think my argument would be, as the PLA becomes more powerful too, the PLA will become a more natural tool to be deployed as well.

Dr. Lin: OK. Let's take two or three additional questions. Maybe the three here, and then we'll go over here.

Audience Question: I'm Peter Humphrey, a Machiavellian intelligence analyst and a former U.S. diplomat.

A minor correction. It's not just Djibouti. China has the so-called "string of pearls," any one of which can be turned into a naval or air force base within six months. My big concern is that China is clearly remaking the world in its own image. And my question is, why aren't we in the game? Why aren't we remaking the world in our own image? Why aren't we utilizing every conceivable overt and covert means to depose the Communist Party of China?

Dr. Swaine: OK.

Audience Question: Hi. I'm Jakub Wozniak, a policy research fellow with the Reischauer Center.

And I have a question for Brian. Because, Brian, you talked about rising Chinese military actions, especially around Taiwan. But my sense is that Taiwan is a unique case. It's a specific central objective for the Communist Party. And the Chinese military is being tailored specifically for this contingency. So my question is, why should we see this increase in the use of military force in China's periphery near Taiwan and then the South China Sea as then translating for defending allies, when, especially near Taiwan, it's more of an offensive setup?

Dr. Swaine: You're going to take several questions, or you want –

Dr. Lin: Yeah, let's take these three.

Dr. Swaine: Oh, three. OK.

Audience Question: Good morning. I'm Karim from the Lebanese Center of Strategic Studies. I'm happy to be here with all of you, and thank you.

I had a question from a different perspective. We know that China, being not involved in any military operation in the recent four or five decades, gave her the chance to get to her peak power faster. So do you think that the U.S. will have the patience to wait China until it's more powerful? Thank you.

Dr. Swaine: I don't understand.

Dr. Lin: Sir, can you clarify your question? The U.S. waiting for China?

Audience Question: So do you think that the U.S. will just sit and wait until China is more powerful and powerful?

Dr. Lin: So if the United States should take preemptive action to check China's growth?

Audience Question: Maybe – yeah. Yes. Thank you.

Dr. Lin: Thank you. OK, a range of questions.

Mr. Hart: Just quickly, I guess on all three. On overthrowing the CCP, I would say I don't think it's clear to me or anyone that that will necessarily lead to a better outcome for the United States, or – the realm of possibilities that that opens up is very unclear.

On the question about Taiwan, I think it's a really crucial point. And I would – I definitely concede that Taiwan is singularly different from all these other issues in terms of the way that China thinks about the potential use of military force, or even how it signals on the military. So I don't want to equate that with how China would support partners. What I think I'm arguing is that it is evidence to me in recent years that China has been willing – as its capabilities have grown, as its confidence has grown – it has been more willing to use military force on the Taiwan issue.

I mean, I would also argue – I mean, China has been willing to use more military force in recent years along the Indian border too, with the skirmishes that we saw there in 2017 and 2020. We've also seen growing coast guard and military activities in the South China Seas, targeting the Philippines in particular. So across the board, I think we see more military and paramilitary activity along China's periphery. And so I would argue that it's a sign, again, of just China's general willingness to use military power.

And there was a third question on U.S. patience. I would argue the U.S. has actually taken steps to try to curtail China's military power, which is we put in export controls to try to limit the PLA's ability to increase its use of those, you know, chips and advanced technologies to support its military growth. So I think the U.S. has taken some actions, but yeah.

Dr. Swaine: Yeah. If you assume China is an implacably adversarial power that is out to undermine the United States at every opportunity and to reorder the entire global system in the direction of authoritarian politics and repression, and it cannot be deterred from doing that except through some kind of forceful effort to overcome the Chinese government, then it's a logical argument. The problem with it is you cannot make a convincing argument that, in fact, China has those exact same objectives and is carrying them out in a methodical way that cannot be altered except through war, or through some military confrontation. I just don't accept that. The record on dealing with China indicates that China responds to its interests. And sometimes those interests require it to cooperate with nations, including the United States. And it has done that repeatedly in a variety of different areas.

And the problem is really that we have a mode of interaction between ourselves and the Chinese that is largely based on a deep-seated notion of strategic competition. And that strategic competition that's very interactive – both sides contribute to it through their behavior, through their statements – it feeds a sense of suspicion, distrust, undermining past understandings that each side had towards the relationship and towards each other. And it leads to worst-casing by both sides about the intentions of the other, and therefore producing zero-sum policies that you see in a variety of different areas. This dynamic that's going on is not a stabilizing dynamic. It's a dynamic that leads to increasingly deeper levels of rivalry and testing by each side of their relative predominance.

China is not a power that can be easily rolled by the United States, or deterred simply by the United States rattling a saber, if the issue has high stakes for the Chinese. The Chinese are not going to just back off on Taiwan because the United States decides it's going to support Taiwan more stringently militarily. It will increase its capabilities. So you have to be able to deal with that dynamic. And the way to deal with that dynamic is you've got to start defusing the idea that what we're in is a simple strategic competition with zero-sum intentions on both sides. You've got to shift it to something that's much more positive, much more positive-sum. And if you believe that that's all just quixotic, and the Chinese are evil and they're going to undermine anything, and they'll lie and steal and cheat and try and maintain their power, expand their power, then there's not much I can say, because I don't believe that's how you can best handle the Chinese,

And this relates to the question of sitting back or taking preemptive action. I agree with Brian. The United States is doing anything but sitting back. Now under Trump, you've seen a movement towards a kind of greater, sort of, I don't know what you would call it, moderation, complacency, kind of shrugging? China, no. Xi Jinping is my good friend. You know, we have great talks. We're moving away from confrontation. That's all ephemeral. It hasn't, in my view, altered the fundamental underlying structural dynamics

and attitudinal dynamics below Trump that I think still drive the United States and China towards a very adversarial position. And the United States, the Pentagon, State Department, the Pacific Command, they are certainly not assuming that the relationship is moving increasingly towards a benign cooperative relationship. And so you are getting efforts not to sit back, by any means.

Now, is the reaction should be a preemptive attack on the Chinese? Of course not. I mean, what does that mean? The Chinese are a major nuclear power. They can strike every foot of this country with nuclear weapons. They have great support among other countries around the world. They generate about a quarter of global growth through their economy globally, according to the World Bank. We're going to just go out there and try and preemptively undermine the Chinese in all of that? It's a ludicrous argument.

Dr. Lin: I do want to jump in a little bit on some of the questions. On the private military company question, I think Xiangwei was asking that in the context of there's debate in China as to whether that is a good idea or not. I highly recommend that as not a good idea, because what we've seen historically is the reason why countries, including Russia, start using private military companies is they use these basically military actors, but they don't have to abide by the same laws of war. They use these military actors to skirt international law and engage in activities in which, if their military were to do so, it would be viewed as very problematic, and probably would start an international incident.

So while I understand the concern that some of the Chinese investments in different countries might not be protected, I don't think having more rampant use of private military companies is necessarily the right way. I think you can have private security companies that are not private military companies provide that same type of support. (Laughs.) So I think to the extent the Chinese scholars are even listening to us, I think it's a very dangerous idea. And it should – it would raise more questions than solve.

And then, to your point about China's military bases, I think Brian had mentioned that there are lots of dual-use facilities that could function as military bases. But I would also point to the Pentagon's China Military Power Report that has listed, if I remember correctly, over a dozen places, specific countries that China has sought and is interested in establishing military bases. So you are very spot-on correct in terms of that China has much more ambition than just Djibouti in terms of being more active over overseas.

I also want to weigh in really quickly on the Taiwan question. And I think this is where I do want to push both of our speakers to think a little bit outside of the box and make the best case for why China could actually defend one of its closest international friends or partners in the future. And I

think one of the things we also have highlighted in our discussion is China doesn't have the ability to project power very much right now.

But if China's power were to grow and it could project power much more, and if we envision a world that is either much more divided, bipolar, like the Cold War, or much more anarchic, like the way that Brian was highlighting, I could see a case in which could be made – in this much more extreme world than we're seeing now – in which we could see China being more willing to defend certain countries. But those are under very specific conditions and a different environment than what we see now. But I think we need to consider that possibility, assuming a lot of things change in the process. I do want to get to – yeah, go – yeah, go ahead first.

Mr. Hart: Sorry. I just wanted to add one quick thing too, because this reminded me of a point I wanted to make. Which is that another reason China might decide – the Taiwan question actually matters on this issue of whether China might support partners because it has been, as we've said, 40-plus years since China has, you know, engaged in a full-on conflict with another country. That, I think – you know, some people have called that a peace disease. That China is unable to use its military because it just doesn't have the experience. That question is really crucial for the Taiwan question. And so if, you know, Beijing worries that because it hasn't engaged in any military activities, because it just doesn't support its international partners, they could worry that that undermines deterrence vis-à-vis the United States, when it comes to matters like Taiwan. That, essentially, that China is a paper tiger if it isn't willing to use any military force. So I think that – I just wanted to add that I think that that matters.

Dr. Swaine: Could I?

Dr. Lin: Yeah, sure. And then we'll take other questions.

Dr. Swaine: Is there time? I'm a little confused about whether we're talking about Taiwan here or we're talking about something bigger. But if we're talking – if we're talking about Taiwan, I believe that China's military capabilities, per se, are not the primary variable that determines whether or not the Chinese are going to attack Taiwan. The Taiwan issue is fundamentally, essentially, a political issue. It's a question of whether or not the possibility of Taiwan unifying with China in some future environment – not under current conditions, but in some future environment – and to do so peacefully and without coercion is possible. It remains possible. It remains within the realm of distinct possibility. U.S. China policy has supposedly expressed that concern, or that that position. It is possible, if China were to unite with Taiwan peacefully.

So the question is – the question is, if you close off that possibility through political behavior, through deployment of diplomats to Taiwan, through a reconstruction of what Taiwan's relationship is with the United States – that it's not a nonstate but it's actually something very close to a state, a formal state – and if you put military forces on Taiwan, et cetera, you're going to close off that window for the Chinese, in their view. They're going to become much more desperate. And even if they don't have great enough capabilities, I think if we were to take those extremely stupid actions, we would be in a war with the Chinese.

The Chinese would rather fight that war, in my view, and possibly lose it, than not to fight at all, because it would see that closing off of the possibility of unification as a direct threat to the very legitimacy of the Chinese state as a bastion of Chinese nationalism in support of reunification, closure after World War II, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. China's government's ability to ensure that would be destroyed. And then the Chinese regime itself would become much less stable. That's the dynamic that's at work, not who has what relative military capability.

Dr. Lin: So it does seem, as a conference organizer, I have failed to have a session on Taiwan. (Laughs.) And every panel we have folks mentioning Taiwan and going back to it. So we'll make sure to have that next year. (Laughter.) I think we have four questions here, so please go ahead.

Audience Question: So my question is, given that recently the conflict with Iran, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the volatility in the Aral Sea, it seems as if the United States and China are already at war with each other through proxies. Because the Silk Road Initiative China has launched is undergoing massive disruptions by the recent conflict happening in the Middle East and between Russia and Ukraine. So to what extent is it that – is China already militarily supporting its allies like Russia and China by providing military equipment, supplies, and chips, whether formally or informal channels? And are we already caught in a proxy war right now? And is there a path to deescalation?

Audience Question: Hi. Guan Wang, assistant professor from University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

My question for both of you is – you have touched upon this, but I would like to hear more clarification – moving forward, what empirical evidence would convince you that China has become more willing to defend or support its partners? Would things like joint military exercise or export of dual-use material be sufficient? Or we need to see something more explicit, such as security guarantees or even direct intervention? Thank you.

Audience Question: Thank you. My question kind of plays into what she just asked, and some of Michael's comments. So is there a danger that, if the United States increases

its military support for the PRC's neighbors or other nations in the periphery – and I'm thinking specifically maybe somewhere down the road, like, a full-blown military alliance with, say, India – could this be a catalyst for a more militant posture from China against its neighbors and other nations in the periphery going forward?

Dr. Swaine: Could what be a catalyst, again?

Audience Question: Essentially, if the United States increases military cooperation, more weapons, maybe tries to get into a full-blown defense pact with India or something like that, considers maybe stationing troops, you know, that kind of thing.

Dr. Lin: Did you have a question? Two more, right? Two more.

Dr. Swaine: Three? We got three.

Dr. Lin: I know, but I think we only have time for one more round, so.

Dr. Swaine: OK, so we'll do five? OK.

Audience Question: Could you talk a lot – a little bit about the strategic area of space? And does that create a new periphery? Is that a new place for strategic power competition? What are the possibilities? What are the likelihoods? What are the dangers? And are there opportunities there too?

Audience Question: Hi, again. Eleanor Hughes from the CSBA and EconVue.

Brian, you kind of stole my thunder a little bit earlier, but I'm really glad you brought up paramilitary dimensions, because the word "paramilitary" is not part of the statement. So I was wondering if you both could talk about paramilitary dimensions, particularly not just in the South China Sea, but I'm thinking the Pacific Islands, with policing agreements. And under what circumstances could paramilitary operations be tapered by China? Thank you very much.

Dr. Swaine: Under what circumstances could they, what?

Audience Question: Could the Chinese taper paramilitary operations in the South China Sea or Pacific Islands. Thank you.

Dr. Swaine: Pay for?

Dr. Lin: Taper or pay for?

Audience Question: Taper. Sorry, taper.

Dr. Lin: So, decrease?

Audience Question: Yeah, decrease.

Dr. Lin: Oh, not increase? OK.

Audience Question: Or, both, increase, decrease.

Dr. Lin: OK. (Laughs.)

Mr. Hart: I'll answer some of those. (Laughter.) There was one question on space, which I think is a really important one. I think space is a critical domain for competition between the U.S. and China. I think no other country comes close to China – after the United States, no other country comes close to China in terms of its space capabilities. I mean, Russia is still a considerable power, but China is quickly surging ahead of Russia. I think that matters because it goes back to one of the earlier arguments I was making, which is that technological changes and proliferation will lower the cost for China to provide. We've already seen, you know, based on reports, China providing satellite imagery with assets in space to, you know, U.S. adversaries, Iran and its proxies. So space is a – I would argue, is a critical enabler of China's ability to support its partners. And I actually think that's going to be one of the most important ways that it does that.

On the question of a proxy war, you know, the Chinese would say that the United States and Russia are in a proxy war in Ukraine. I don't think the United States government – well, you know, if you look at what Trump, President Trump, says, he would not view China as being in a proxy war. He has pushed back on some of the claims about what China has done for countries like Iran. I think China has gone to – China's provided a lot of support, as I laid out in the beginning, for Russia and Iran in their conflicts. But it hasn't gone up to the point of providing the kind of aid that the United States, I think, would view – you know, this crossing of the Rubicon of providing lethal aid that then, you know, is used against U.S. forces. I think that's a meaningful distinction, personally. I mean, you could make the argument that what China is doing is, you know, potentially approaching a proxy support for its partners, but I don't think that's a clear-cut argument.

On the paramilitary, just quickly on that one, I think – so when I said paramilitary, I largely meant the China Coast Guard. There are other forces too, China's Maritime Militia. I think that, though, the distinction between the Coast Guard and the PLA, their vessels are colored different hulls. You know, Coast Guard vessels are white. You know, PLA Navy vessels are gray. But they're largely acting in similar ways. And they are actually working together. China uses its Coast Guard as a way to operate under a certain

threshold that that doesn't involve its navy directly in some of these activities. And we've seen them time and time again use that as a tool, especially in the South China Sea. So I think that that's meaningful here. And I don't think – I think that the distinction between the Coast Guard and PLA Navy is not as important as, you know, China would like to cast it to be. I think they use that to their advantage. So, yeah, I'll just leave that there.

Dr. Swaine: OK. I don't think I got all these questions. But we have to keep in mind quite a lot of what we're talking about now is not actually related to the proposition. (Laughter.) So just keep that in mind.

I think that – you know, I agree with Brian. I mean, the United States is not already at war with China over Iran or over Ukraine. China is a third party that has relations with both Iran and with Russia. It provides a limited amount of assistance to both of them, while at the same time trying to posture as a power that wants to – wants to support the idea of some kind of negotiated resolution, and doesn't make an explicit stand on behalf of one side or the other in saying you need to accept their side or the other side. It tries to act as if it's – as if it's a neutral arbiter, which of course it is not. But, nonetheless, it does support that through restraint, to a certain degree, on the level and type of assistance it's giving to these countries. So you're not at war. So you don't need a way out of getting out of the war.

What you do need to do is deescalate and defuse the conflicts. I mean, you could defuse the Iran conflict real fast if Donald Trump decided that his little game needed to be resolved, by reaching some kind of understanding with Iran. Now, I'm not saying that, you know, he could easily just do that by accepting all of what Iran demands, but the United States caused that war, no question about it, and the United States could, under certain circumstances, end that war. And that would alter the calculations of the Chinese in their relationship to Iran and the region. So, you know, that's one way of getting out. The Russia-Ukraine issue, which is very complex and we don't really have the time to go into it all right now, but it also needs to be resolved through negotiation. You're not going to get a clear win by one side or the other. And I think the Chinese would like to see that. So, you know, we're in a different set of circumstances than one of warfare.

Now, one question was, if the U.S. increases its defense assistance to certain countries that are its friends, or kind of its friends, like India, would this provoke the Chinese? If you had, say, a formal security pact with the Indians? First of all, I think if you think that's going to happen, you really need to get, you know, a clear understanding – the Indians are not going to sign a formal security pact with the United States. But if they were to, and all of what that meant – mutual security treaty and everything – it wouldn't provoke the Chinese to, like, what? Attack India or attack the United States?

It would provoke the Chinese to try to exert pressure on both sides, but particularly on India, to try to moderate that pact, or to try to put conditions on it, in ways that are not directed at China. And it would also probably lead the Chinese to become more supportive of Pakistan to put pressure on India, because that's been its major – that's the major purpose of Pakistan for China, is to put pressure on India. And so it would likely increase its level of support for Pakistan. And it would – and it would create more tension. I don't think it would create more stability. It would create more tension. But it's not – that doesn't necessarily predict a war, by any means.

And the last point about the paramilitary tapering down or increasing, the Chinese used a whole host of different kinds of paramilitary or semi-military. They have the coast guard, they have the military militia, and they have other entities that they operate under in the South China Sea and in the East China Sea. And they do that in order to show two things. One, to show their territorial claims. This is all Chinese territory we're talking about, from their perspective. These are disputed areas in general, but they think they're Chinese territory. So we have the coast guard involved in it. So we have another paramilitary military militia involved in it. So it's not a fight with a foreign power. So we don't have to get our navy involved with it directly. But the navy stands back behind it. The navy backs it. But it doesn't want to get directly involved in it.

So it makes a distinction between what you call gray hulls and white hulls in getting involved in a lot of these issues. And I think the Chinese military will continue to do that. They will likely not taper off their military militia. They will likely not taper off their coast guard. They could very well increase their capabilities, which they seem to have done vis-à-vis the Philippines. All these entities that engage with the Philippines, as far as I know, I think they're by and large non-naval. They are coast guard, paramilitary types entities. And the Chinese believe in that kind of distinction, because if you start wading in with your military, your full-blown military, then it creates a much higher degree of escalation that could make it a more serious conflict that could, in the case of the Philippines, draw in the United States. And the Chinese don't want to draw the United States into a direct confrontation with themselves in dealing with the Philippines.

Now, the Americans don't regard these distinctions the way the Chinese do. The Americans think if the coast guard is threatening our ally, the Philippines, it's threatening our ally. We don't care if it's a coast guard or a PLAN ship. We're going to respond. So they use that as a way of threatening the Chinese to say, don't try and play these games with us about these different levels of types of militaries. But for the Chinese, I think that's meaningful. And it could very well be meaningful for other countries too, in making distinctions like that. I think that's it.

Dr. Lin: Great. Thank you.

Dr. Swaine: Oh, that's 11:00. My god. Sorry, I said too much.

Dr. Lin: Yeah. (Laughs.) No, it's OK. Just really quickly, I do think there are a lot of factors that complicate the end of the Iran war. And, of course, that's not the focus of this panel. But one thing I will plug for on the space question is our colleague Kari Bingen has an excellent analysis of space capabilities comparing the United States with space capabilities of other countries. So I recommend you to look at some of her recent reports. And then on – really quickly on your question of paramilitary, maybe I understood your question incorrectly, but I was thinking what we didn't cover was how China may be willing to defend its international friends from internal unrest, right, using security forces. And I think that's very different than what we've been talking about, again, in terms of defending friends against other foreign adversaries.

Dr. Swaine: That's different.

Dr. Lin: And I think that the threshold for that might be lower, particularly if they're supporting a regime internally and domestically versus from an external adversary. But really excellent question.

I want to use the last minute to have the audience vote again. So I think we'll just vote exactly on the proposition. So if you are – after this discussion, even though there's a consensus among the two speakers, if you do believe that as China's power grows it will be more willing to militarily support and defend its international friends, please vote yes. And please vote no if you don't. For those who can't see the slide or who are online, you can vote either using the QR code or through the website. And if you're in the room, if you have any problems voting please feel free to raise your hand.

Dr. Swaine: Oh, it's coming down right. (Laughs.)

Dr. Lin: Well, I mean, Brian didn't even agree with his own proposition. (Laughter.) He only agreed with half of it, so. OK. I think it was, like, what 45 to 55 (percent), and now it's almost 25 to 75 (percent). Mainly because Brian, you conceded part of your proposition willingly, not because you were necessarily defeated. (Laughter.) So I want to give a –

Dr. Swaine: I conceded part of mine too.

Dr. Lin: Yes, you did too, right? We didn't have a compromise position that people could vote on. So let's give a round of applause for Michael and Brian. (Applause.) So we'll take a 15-minute break and reconvene at 11:15 for the next debate.

(END.)