

The Threat that Leaves Something to Chance in U.S.-China Relations

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Changing Strategic Balance

China is developing...

- more secure & credible second strike
- sophisticated conventional forces for anti-access/area denial strategy

Deterrence Concern is that...

- conventional conflict too costly for United States
- but U.S. nuclear threats not credible

U.S. Response: Conventional Deterrence by Denial

- deny china the benefits of anti-access/area denial strategy
- use conventional forces to deny benefits
- greater reliance on nuclear weapons not credible

The Threat that Leaves Something to Chance

- fear of escalation to nuclear war should contribute to deterrence even when nuclear threats aren't credible
- both countries uncertain of each other's intentions & capabilities
- miscalculation, misperception, & miscommunication create risk of inadvertent escalation

The Threat that Leaves Something to Chance

- escalation is “an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses thresholds considered significant by one or more of the participants” – *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, Rand Project Air Force
- thresholds are subjective
- actors might be unaware of each other’s thresholds or interpret the same threshold differently

Applying the Threat that Leaves Something to Chance

- U.S. couldn't credibly threaten to start a nuclear war with the Soviet Union
- but U.S. could credibly threaten to stumble into one (e.g., stationing U.S. forces in Europe)
- the *chance* of escalation to nuclear war would deter Soviet Union
- China's lack of transparency & strategic posture heighten risks of inadvertent escalation

Counter-Space & Cyber Forces

- satellites & computer networks important for command & control, communication, ISR, navigation, & precision targeting
- unlikely China would understand U.S. thresholds
- escalation risks of counter-space & cyber weapons could exceed actual capabilities

Dual-Mission Delivery Vehicles

- missiles of the same model, but some carry conventional warheads & some carry nuclear warheads
- may be co-located in same base or storage facility & share command & control facilities
- U.S. attacks a conventional target, but China perceives it as an attack on nuclear forces

Nuclear Signaling

- PLA writings emphasize counter-deterrence
- posture nuclear forces to signal resolve & capability
- U.S. & China could perceive same threshold, but interpret the implications differently

What are the Implications?

- risks of inadvertent escalation will only influence China if Chinese leaders perceive them as risks
- transparency & predictability to reduce risks
- U.S. not credible if it identifies a problem and does nothing to solve it

This could strengthen deterrence if...

- U.S. convinces China that concerns are genuine & valid
- China becomes more cautious, less confident in ability to control crises & conflicts