

The Strategic Environment between the United States and China

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Because this is a conference on strategic nuclear issues, I'm going to talk about only a small segment of the strategic environment. For example, I'm not going to cover the impact of the recent U.S. government shutdown or China's suggestion for an alternative reserve currency to replace the U.S. dollar. Instead I'll try to look at geopolitical factors with potential strategic—and therefore nuclear—implications. Participants in these discussions always stress that they are offering their personal views. This is particularly true of these observations. They are not the formal view of the United States government or any of the organizations represented here. They are probably not the view of some of my American colleagues.

At the most basic level, the strategic environment is the same as it has been throughout our decade-long series of meetings:

- Both our countries know that the relationship between the United States and China will be the dominant geo-political fact of the 21st century.
- Both know that the Sino-American relationship will be a mixture of cooperation and competition.
- Both sides are aware of the historical fact that the rise of new major global powers has often resulted in conflict.
- Therefore, both want to avoid letting competition blend into confrontation or into something remotely like the Cold War. Instead they seek a new type of major power relationship.
- As a result, both stress the importance and inevitability of China's peaceful rise, with the United States placing emphasis on "peaceful" and China placing emphasis on "rise."
- Each has concerns, however. China fears the United States doesn't truly accept its rise and seeks to contain it. The United States fears that China sees its rise as displacing the traditional U.S. role and influence in the Pacific.
- Each country is undertaking specific military programs—China's anti-access approach and growing naval capability and the U.S. AirSea Battle—that, whatever their intent could be useful in case of confrontation.

Nuclear weapons loom in the background of all these points. Both countries believe that there are no interests in conflict that are important enough to risk a nuclear exchange. But each is suspicious of the other. Consistent with China's fears that the United States seeks to contain its rise, many Chinese fear that U.S. national ballistic missile defense is aimed at China. In turn, consistent with American concern that China seeks to diminish U.S. influence, many U.S. analysts look at China's nuclear modernization and fear China intends to go beyond what Western analysts call minimum deterrence to something else, something that could seek to alter the strategic nuclear landscape in fundamental ways. This could entail a so-called "sprint to parity" or an increased conventional adventurism encouraged by China's growing confidence in its nuclear deterrent. The Americans in this

room will all tell you that Chinese fears of national missile defense are groundless and that our systems are designed to deal with North Korea and Iran. The Chinese in this room will stress that their goal is a lean and effective nuclear force and that they reject both arms races and expansion of nuclear missions. Both may be telling the truth, but neither side has been able to fully convince the other.

If this description is even remotely correct, it suggests that the strategic environment demands greater attention to both a short-term and a long-term task. The short term task is to ensure that latent mutual suspicion and fear does not increase the chance of crises leading to a risk of military engagement that neither side intends. The maritime domain today—and perhaps the cyber domain tomorrow—seem to be the most logical areas where such a crisis might arise. This in turn suggests the importance of the session we will have tomorrow on Crises Management and Confidence and Security Building Measures. It also suggests the need for more effort to discussing American alliances in the Pacific which American's see as focused on extended deterrence but some Chinese may fear are elements of a containment strategy. Finally, Russia is an important factor in the national security of both our countries. The United States now seeks (so far without success) to engage Russia in a new round of arms reductions, cutting strategic forces by about one-third. Many Russians and Americans will want some assurance that China will not respond to these reductions with a major increase in its own nuclear forces. We need to jointly consider ways China might meet these concerns.

The long-term task is to work now so that the future will be biased toward cooperation rather than potential confrontation. Cooperation—like any skill—takes practice. Later in our meeting we will discuss cooperation in nonproliferation and with respect to space. These areas are each important in their own right. But they are also important as ways of building habits of working together. The two sides should seek areas in which to cooperate. Our work together both in anti-piracy patrols and on the Center of Excellence on Nuclear Security are good models.

In this regard, President Xi Jinping's call for "a new type of relationship between major countries in the 21st century" is a particularly hopeful step. It suggests a future based on cooperation, recognizing inevitable competition, but avoiding major conflict. Americans are fascinated by the possibilities of this proposal and are eager to understand what it might mean in practice.

Both long term and short term tasks call for dialogue between governments, dialogues conducted with both candor and respect. Unfortunately, the final characteristic of the strategic environment is an inability of our two countries to find a way to hold such dialogue at a Track 1 level. Our task therefore is both to generate ideas that can be available when such a dialogue can finally occur and to work within our respective governments to speed the day when detailed official interactions are feasible.

Thank you. I look forward to our discussions.