THE ISSUE:

EDITORS’ NOTE

Edited by Jude Blanchette of CSIS and Hal Brands of SAIS, the Marshall Papers is a series of essays that probes and challenges the assessments underpinning the U.S. approach to great power rivalry. The Papers will be rigorous yet provocative, continually pushing the boundaries of intellectual and policy debates. In this Marshall Paper, Michael J. Mazarr argues that amid escalating U.S.-China tensions, American policymakers are gravely underprepared to manage the episodic crises that form an inevitable part of great power rivalry. Effective crisis response can not only prevent escalation, but also strengthen U.S. strategic advantage within the larger rivalry. Drawing lessons from the Cold War, Mazarr distills six principles to guide crisis management among U.S. policymakers navigating an increasingly crisis-prone U.S.-China relationship.

With U.S.-China relations already headed toward a more belligerent rivalry, U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022 was bound to cause heartburn in Beijing. China responded with an elaborate show of force around the island: shooting missiles over Taiwan and into Japanese exclusive economic zone (EEZ) waters, firing rocket artillery into the Taiwan Strait, declaring a ring of maritime exclusion zones around Taiwan, and surging over 200 military aircraft and 50 ships into Taiwanese airspace and waters. Many now refer to the event as the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Yet compared to previous confrontations around Taiwan, the United States this time failed to play much of its appointed part. The Biden administration mostly stayed aloof, condemning China’s actions but not dispatching U.S. forces to confront China directly. If there was a crisis, it was largely one-sided, with China posturing and slingling missiles and the United States watching from the sidelines. The resulting U.S. coolness left China thrashing in a performative display that produced condemnations from Japan, Australia, and Europe.

This U.S. strategy might have been quietly brilliant, inviting China to stamp and roar and drive many countries further into a balancing coalition. The administration may have decided that a belligerent response would have been inappropriate given that it had been the action of a U.S. official that had sparked the crisis. But it remains to be seen if restraint was the right choice. The crisis arguably furnished China with an ability to set a new threshold for military intimidation in the strait and beyond. Some observers worried that U.S. moderation would encourage China to escalate its coercion in the future, a concern fueled in part by commentary in China that seemed to brag about the absence of a more forceful U.S. response.

One thing seems clear: an era of persistent confrontations in U.S.-China relations has arrived. The escalating rivalry
is, unavoidably, a long-term campaign for predominance in which each side makes investments, builds forces, and develops technologies to gain competitive advantage—as symbolized by the set of potent sanctions Washington recently imposed on Taiwan’s semiconductor industry. But it will also take a more perilous form as a series of discrete collisions that demand careful statecraft. Not all these events will be on the scale of the Taiwan Strait Crisis. Some could involve sudden disclosures of Chinese troops at foreign bases, large-scale cyber intrusions of U.S. systems, or proxy conflicts that emerge out of disputes over third parties. But some of the confrontations could be even violent and dangerous, such as outright Chinese military action against islands in the Taiwan Strait, an all-out blockade of Taiwan itself, or even seeming preparations for an invasion.

In dealing with the Taiwan issue and larger U.S.-China relations, the United States should keep firmly in mind that these are primarily political issues, which demand diplomatic solutions. Attending to the statecraft of the larger relationship is the essential route to avoiding and mitigating crises. But in intense rivalries, crises are likely to emerge despite such efforts. In such an era of persistent clashes, the United States will need criteria to guide its responses—a handbook for managing a series of skirmishes within the larger rivalry. This essay offers an initial down payment on such thinking by drawing lessons from the most recent U.S. experience with managing crises within a larger rivalry: the Cold War. It uses those lessons to suggest six principles for managing confrontations with China. The resulting approach is to get the fundamentals of a systemic competition right and then strike a difficult but necessary balance: respond rapidly and decisively in support of a few vital commitments while resisting the urge to endow lesser clashes with undue significance.

**In such an era of persistent clashes, the United States will need criteria to guide its responses—a handbook for managing a series of skirmishes within the larger rivalry.**

**DIAGNOSING A RIVALRY: LESSONS AND INSIGHTS FROM THE COLD WAR**

In some critical ways, the emerging rivalry is unlike the Cold War. China is more of an aggrieved rising power determined to recapture its place in world politics than the Soviet Union was at the beginning of the Cold War. China’s economic and technological power is vastly greater, and it may turn out to be more pugnacious in crises—more self-righteous, more overconfident (partly out of a faith in its ability to control crises and limited wars in a mechanistic way), more anxious to use crises to teach punitive lessons, and less willing to negotiate or even communicate during a skirmish if it believes doing so would signal weakness. But there are enough areas of similarity between these two crisis-prone rivalries that the Cold War experience can offer relevant lessons.

**LESSON ONE: MAJOR RIVALRIES ARE SYSTEMIC CONTESTS.**

To begin with, the Cold War suggests that principles for managing confrontations should be grounded in a conception of the rivalry’s essential character. If it is a primarily military or imperial contest for strategic points, then the resolution of individual standoffs at such sites may be decisive. The Cold War, however, was not such a contest—it was a competition between systems and their domestic and international bases of power. The dominant center of gravity was domestic economic, social, technological, and cultural dynamism. Societal dynamism is the foundational measure of systemic competitiveness, and the Soviet system failed that test in the Cold War—it could not generate sufficient growth, innovation, or legitimacy. The Cold War systemic competition played out in international terms as well, in the struggle for leadership of international markets, institutions, and processes—the ability to set the rules of the international system and become the hub of predominant networks of finance, trade, people, and ideas. In such a systemic contest, power emerges from the production of legitimacy, economic power, and cultural influence that radiates outward and reshapes world politics. Any systemic contest is a struggle to be the dominant gravitational force in world politics. Here, too, the United States prevailed: the primary international institutions became increasingly oriented toward the United States and other leading democracies, which came to embody far greater magnetic power due to their economic dynamism, cultural attraction, military power, and broadly accepted legitimacy.

Many of the same themes can be detected in the current rivalry between the United States and China. It is certainly a contest of domestic systems: China’s economic dynamism, and the innovation and technological sophistication it has spawned, underlies its ability to
challenge the United States.\textsuperscript{20} In global terms, China is seeking to gain influence in the United Nations and other international forums, weaken U.S.-led institutions, and build a set of Sino-centric ones, from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.\textsuperscript{21} China is seeking dominance, and the ability to use others’ dependencies for leverage, in several high-technology sectors.

This theory of the nature of rivalries carries important lessons for the management of confrontations. Overreacting to individual encounters will usually be a mistake: a rivalry focused on long-term systemic attraction will not be determined by any one clash.\textsuperscript{22} In a contest powerfully influenced by attractive power and perceived legitimacy, over-aggressive and belligerent states will tend to undermine their long-term strategic position. They will also do so for classic reasons of strategic overreach: great powers that pour resources into distant clashes of secondary importance end up exhausting themselves and becoming strategically insolvent.\textsuperscript{23}

Yet the Cold War also suggests that gravitational effects and network power depend partly on perception and on others’ confidence in an actor’s power. Cultivating a reputation for strength and reliability is a systemic requirement every bit as important as avoiding overreach. Establishing guardrails on a rival’s progress, through a carefully selected set of inflexible commitments—in the case of the Cold War, the core U.S. alliances in Europe and Asia—can safeguard a baseline level of credibility. And it can provide running room to be more flexible on secondary issues without sparking a collapse of a great power’s global position.

\textbf{Overreacting to individual encounters will usually be a mistake: a rivalry focused on long-term systemic attraction will not be determined by any one clash.}

Such flexibility is available because of a related lesson from the Cold War: while a reputation for credible commitments is important, reputation is a contingent factor—not every standoff carries the same reputational weight, and the lessons that friends and rivals take from individual crises will depend on many factors.\textsuperscript{24} Iain Henry has documented, for example, in the context of earlier Taiwan Strait crises, that U.S. allies sometimes prefer that the United States not fulfill other commitments if they do not directly enhance the ally’s security.\textsuperscript{25} Some U.S. allies and key regional states welcomed pre-Korean War U.S. statements that it would not defend Taiwan, fearing that to do so would drag them into conflict.\textsuperscript{26} More recent cases—such as Russia’s reaction to the U.S. failure to enforce a red line on chemical weapons use in Syria—reinforce the point that the credibility lessons others draw from U.S. actions are specific to each case.\textsuperscript{27} There is no imperative to show strength in every test of wills.\textsuperscript{28} An important lesson of the Cold War, then, is that even a bitter systemic rivalry is not a zero-sum affair.

\textbf{LESSON TWO: THE AMBITIONS OF A GREAT POWER ARE A WORK IN PROGRESS.}

The Cold War also suggests that any strategy for managing recurring confrontations should rely upon an accurate diagnosis of the rival’s intentions. A China on a global mission of military adventurism would demand a very different series of responses in discrete crises from a China in a defensive crouch, reacting to perceived attacks from the United States.

U.S. strategy in the Cold War reflected in part an extended, imperfect effort to calculate the real intentions of Soviet leadership. Debates around such issues began with George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” and “X” article, which detected an urge to power in the Russian culture and Soviet system but also real risk aversion, and continued through the argument over the sincerity of reformers of the Gorbachev era.\textsuperscript{29} But in retrospect, perhaps the most important lesson was how inchoate Soviet ambitions were—grand and global in rhetorical content but mixed, often half-hearted, and contradictory in application.\textsuperscript{30} Far from being set in stone, Soviet intentions were a work in progress, an evolving set of ideas, commitments, and opportunistic grabs unfolding under nebulous long-term doctrines. A key lesson of the Cold War, then, is the potential gap between the ideological, rhetorical, and even strategic proclamations of a great power and its practical ability, or even at times desire, to pursue them.\textsuperscript{31}

A related lesson is that the Soviet intentions and actions, which unfolded during the Cold War, were reactive as much as self-generated. Soviet leaders occasionally glimpsed windows of opportunity based on perceived U.S. or Western weakness. More often, however, their ambitions were driven by concerns about what the United States was doing or might do, or about the dangerous potential of emerging trends. One does not have to fully embrace a comprehensive revisionist account of the Cold
War to accept that in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Afghanistan in 1979, the Able Archer nuclear crisis of 1983 and many other cases, Moscow was acting out of reactive alarm rather than calculated revisionist ambitions. Even the Cuban Missile Crisis stemmed primarily from Khushchev’s worries about a U.S. invasion of Cuba and an unfavorable nuclear balance.

The concept of emergent rather than fixed national intentions has much in common with the portrait of Germany authored in 1907 by the British civil servant Eyre Crowe. It was obvious, Crowe wrote, that “Germany distinctly aims at playing on the world’s political stage a much larger and more dominant part than she finds allotted to herself under the present distribution of materiel power.” But the issue was whether this reflected a formally outlined agenda or a series of improvisations. It was entirely plausible, he argued, that “the great German design is in reality no more than the expression of a vague, confused, and unpractical statesmanship, not fully realizing its own drift” and that “Germany does not really know what she is driving at.” Crowe concluded that it did not matter much which interpretation was correct: a belligerent Germany fueled by an “erratic, domineering, and often frankly aggressive spirit” was moving in a direction perilous to British interests whether it had a strict plan or not. It had to be opposed.

In a similar way, the Soviet Union’s ambitions in the Cold War reflected at least as much of an ongoing extemporization under imprecise long-term desires as any consistent long-term plan. This does not mean that the Soviet Union was not aggressive or goal-oriented: Vladislav Zubok has pushed back against excessively revisionist accounts of Soviet intentions, noting that ideology did fuel Soviet foreign policy and that:

- Stalin’s policy was not one of confusion and defense, but one of cautious expansionism. Various factors intervened to prevent implementation of his policies, but historians should not overlook specific designs and intentions that produced those policies in the first place. Stalin was clever and scheming, and he regarded the Western powers as dangerous rivals.

The resulting Soviet objectives were in many ways inexact and conceptual, more of a work in progress than a preset plan. Any given Soviet lunge—backing Kim Il-sung’s invasion of South Korea, putting missiles into Cuba, or invading Hungary or Czechoslovakia—was more likely to be a momentary, unplanned scheme or reaction than a cog in an orchestrated machine of conquest.

Given this emergent, improvisational character of goals and the lack of detailed information about others’ thinking, the Cold War and earlier great power rivalries show the great difficulty of gauging a rival’s true intentions. States uncertain of others’ goals then often engage in worst-case analysis and overreact to specific moves. In the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union frequently misread the true reasons behind specific actions and reacted based on often exaggerated beliefs about each other’s purposes. A classic example was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: the Carter administration saw it as the first step toward military control of the Persian Gulf, when in fact Soviet leaders were desperately trying to prevent the country from slipping out of the Soviet orbit.

There are many reasons to believe that this basic model applies to China today; it is a state with elaborate goals, but ones without precise form and subject to misunderstanding. China’s international objectives are more of an improvisational work in progress in service of some clear but very broad long-term goals, rather than the working out of a rigid, pre-planned campaign. To be clear, this is not to suggest that the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) lacks ambition: China aspires to modify and even partially dismantle the U.S.-led post-war order and achieve some version of global leadership and deference to its wishes, at least in its own region. Some degree of global control is inextricably linked to the CCP’s core ambition of national rejuvenation.

China’s goals are therefore formidable and potentially dangerous to U.S. interests. The argument here is only that the detailed requirements for a world that would meet these goals are being worked out over time, and the strategies China uses to obtain them are also emerging through trial and error. Much like Germany in 1907 or the Soviet Union in 1946, China has a broad sense of a desired future—but the shape of its precise components, and what it is prepared to do to achieve them, remain very much a work in progress. And they will emerge through a long-term interaction with its primary perceived antagonist, the United States—not because the United States is responsible for all Chinese belligerence, but because Beijing will respond in part to perceived threats and to actions which appear intended to deny it the achievement of what it regards as legitimate interests.

This is apparent from the phrases that Chinese officials and scholars have used to depict their goals, which are powerful but also vague and abstract. Statements such
as “win-win cooperation” and “a community of common destiny” seem more like assertions of hope and general intent than a commitment to a specific agenda.\textsuperscript{38} Hal Brands and Michael Beckley argue that “China doesn’t want to be a superpower—one pole of many in the international system. It wants to be the superpower—the geopolitical sun around which the system revolves,” but even that potent objective could take many forms. They admit that its goals exist more in a “rough consensus” than any “detailed, step-by-step plans” and that it does not require “outright physical dominance” in the manner of some previous imperial powers.\textsuperscript{39}

**Much like Germany in 1907 or the Soviet Union in 1946, China has a broad sense of a desired future—but the shape of its precise components, and what it is prepared to do to achieve them, remain very much a work in progress.**

Perhaps the most powerful recent case for an expansive view of China’s ambitions is Rush Doshi’s book *The Long Game*, which makes the argument that Chinese official sources suggest an almost unlimited thirst for regional hegemony and global predominance. Yet even in his extensive account, most of the phrases attributed to official documents are rather vague: “make new and greater contributions to humanity,” “actively accomplishing something,” “a new type of international relations,” a “community of common destiny,” and other fuzzy exhortations. More pointed and specific demands, such as the suggestion that U.S. alliances must be ruined, tend to come from individual scholars or breast-pounding statements from specific Chinese commentators.\textsuperscript{40} In fact, many Chinese sources explicitly reject such terms as “hegemony,” associating it with Western imperial ambitions and claiming China seeks something very different. Some explicitly accept the idea of sharing world power, as Doshi puts it at one point, as “co-equals” with the United States.\textsuperscript{41} As Paul Heer put it in a respectful but critical review of Doshi’s book: “What Doshi appears to be overlooking or dismissing here is the possibility that China seeks to escape subordination to the United States, but without presuming that it can, in turn, subordinate the United States: that it expects a central role in global leadership without presuming exclusive global hegemony.”\textsuperscript{42}

Many other sources recognize the loose concepts and definitions inherent in Chinese strategic statements. One recent RAND study concluded that “no official Chinese document that outlines a strategy for managing competition with the United States is known to exist. . . . At most, officials have described Chinese concepts, guiding principles, and proposals for foreign policy, all of which provide important clues as to Chinese intent.”\textsuperscript{43} Nadège Rolland argues that Beijing seems intent on some form of recognized primacy but explains that the precise elements of such a vision remain unformed and subject to debate.\textsuperscript{44} The vagueness, silence, and variety of opinions in Chinese thinking on strategic objectives suggest to Aaron Friedberg that “analysis of China’s long-term strategy cannot help but rest heavily on inference and speculation.”\textsuperscript{45}

Friedberg is deeply concerned about expansive Chinese ambitions, but he too relies on generic terms to capture China’s intent—seeking “predominance,” “preponderance,” or “hegemony”—while admitting that its “precise definition, and the extent to which” these concepts “can be achieved at acceptable cost at any given moment, remain[s] open to discussion and debate.” At one point he suggests that a more emergent approach to objectives may reflect an essential characteristic of Chinese strategy. Whereas Western strategy tends to be goal-directed, Chinese thinking tends to be “more organic and improvisational and less mechanical and deterministic.” Friedberg also points out that different Chinese officials “may be divided, or even undecided,” about the shape of their objectives.\textsuperscript{46}

Chinese writings also admit constraints on the tools the country might use to gain its desired future. They emphasize avoidance of war with the United States as well as other limits, such as an emphasis on nonmilitary forms of power, and recognize “the importance of having a balanced and nuanced strategy that avoids disastrous missteps.”\textsuperscript{47} Chinese strategy recognizes that a stable international environment and a friendly regional environment are essential to national rejuvenation,\textsuperscript{48} and Chinese official and unofficial sources stress the need for international legitimacy as a supporting pillar for both domestic legitimacy and the kind of leading global role Beijing seeks—based on the open acceptance of Chinese authority as a force for good, not the grudging tolerance of a resented coercion.\textsuperscript{49} Some Chinese sources have described an “ideal security environment” in ways that do not appear to demand hegemony at all.\textsuperscript{50} Chinese sources dispute the question of whether the United States would accept subordination to a clearly superior China, and
and surely elements of it are planned from Beijing. But the broad Chinese hope to play a leading role in world politics, frequent ad-libbing.

Petersen, Will Doig, and Jonathan Hillman have chronicled, (BRI). As analysts such as Raffaello Pantucci, Alexandros for achieving hegemony—the Belt and Road Initiative Chinese ambitions comes from studies of its primary tool statements of its scholars and officials.

Perhaps the most important place to judge the scope of Chinese ambitions as they play out in practice, as opposed to theory, is in its push-and-pull with specific targets of influence. South Korea provides an interesting recent example. When Seoul announced in 2016 an intention to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in cooperation with the United States, China reacted angrily, calling the capability a threat to its nuclear deterrent. When South Korea went ahead with an initial THAAD deployment in 2017, China imposed economic sanctions, which cost South Korea and estimated $8 billion or more.

The Moon Jae-in administration in South Korea sought to proceed with a partial deployment while mollifying Beijing, offering a promise of “three nos”: Seoul promised not to deploy more than one THAAD system, not to actively join a U.S. missile defense network, and not to seek a trilateral military alliance with the United States and Japan. This result demonstrated some Chinese influence but not an ability to dictate outcomes: China backed off its sanctions even though the initial THAAD system remained in place. Since that time, China’s belligerence has had a significant price. Public opinion in South Korea turned starkly against China. The new president, Yoon Suk Yeol, has declared that the “three nos” do not represent permanent South Korean policy and describes the U.S. alliance as “fundamental” to South Korean security. Chinese diplomacy on this issue has been improvising in service of a general goal—and the outcome does not reflect a linear march toward the future of Chinese regional suzerainty described in the most aggressive statements of its scholars and officials.

More evidence for the emergent, unplanned nature of Chinese ambitions comes from studies of its primary tool for achieving hegemony—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As analysts such as Raffaello Pantucci, Alexandros Petersen, Will Doig, and Jonathan Hillman have chronicled, to observe the working out of the BRI on the ground is to see a massive exercise in decentralized initiative and frequent ad-libbing. The overall enterprise does support a broad Chinese hope to play a leading role in world politics, and surely elements of it are planned from Beijing. But the empirical record of its unfolding suggests an accumulating set of emerging programs and ideas rather than a rigid and deterministic program.

China’s ambitions thus appear to reflect a typical degree of elaborate geopolitical self-image characteristic of rising great powers, infused with China’s particular blend of resentment over past mistreatment and sense of cultural superiority. The United States should not underestimate the intensity, reach, or emotional resonance of those ambitions. On the other hand, the precise scope of a world China could live with remains undefined. “The question of whether they will have to settle for something less than clear-cut preponderance is probably unresolved at this point in the minds of China’s leaders,” Aaron Friedberg concluded. Individual confrontations, much as in the Cold War, can represent many things: a carefully planned step toward regional hegemony, a defensive reaction to a perceived threat, a trial or experiment, or the initiative of one part of the CCP bureaucracy. And along the way, U.S. actions and responses to Chinese behavior will shape Beijing’s perceptions of the degree to which the United States is fundamentally opposed to its core interests, and the sort of world it believes is possible.

**LESSON THREE: THERE IS WISDOM TO MODERATION IN CRISIS.**

The Cold War offers a final lesson in the handling of individual U.S.-China clashes. Despite the common idea that containment demanded an immediate answer to every Soviet and Chinese initiative, in fact, Washington succeeded in the Cold War in part precisely because it picked its spots. President Harry Truman rejected demands to escalate the Korean War and accepted an unsatisfying draw. Dwight Eisenhower refused French pleas to join the war in Indochina during the 1954 siege of Dien Bien Phu, rebuffed calls to intervene during Moscow’s invasion of Hungary in 1956, and sought to preserve U.S. geopolitical legitimacy by opposing British and French interventions in Suez that same year.

The United States did not commit force to respond to Soviet interventions in Czechoslovakia in 1968 or Afghanistan in 1979. It accepted a communist takeover of Cuba and allowed an anti-American theocracy to take root in Iran. In some of these cases, of course, Washington turned to covert regime change operations to pursue its goals, but it avoided the use of force in the initial crisis. That dismal parade of nonresponses would seem to be an obvious recipe for failure—allowing a rival to succeed, or accepting U.S. losses, in one crisis and war after another. Yet the United States prevailed because the rivalry
ultimately represented a clash of systems, one decided first and foremost by the organic power of the relative societies. The United States did erect a strong floor under the day-to-day competition by committing resolutely to a handful of treaty commitments and vital interests, notably the defense of Europe, South Korea, and Japan, which placed strict limits on how far Soviet or Chinese success in other crises would cascade. But it prevailed (and survived) as much due to restraint as to belligerence.

Weathering these collisions required something else as well: a mutual willingness to combine steadfastness with reassurance and compromise during even the worst crises. Both sides showed a recurring ability to respect the most essential interests of the other and to accept that avoiding escalation demanded conciliation. This was the pattern in U.S. restraint in Korea and Vietnam, in the series of crises over Berlin, in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and in many other cases. Managing confrontations was as much about empathy and compromise as it was about power.

Yet the United States prevailed because the rivalry ultimately represented a clash of systems, one decided first and foremost by the organic power of the relative societies.

Of course, U.S. appreciation for this fact was wildly inconsistent. All too often, U.S. officials misread individual confrontations as the result of Soviet aggressiveness and belligerence rather than fear and desperation. Some of the most dangerous moments in the Cold War flared up when one or both sides exaggerated the stakes of local disputes. This basic misperception cropped up again and again, from the Berlin crises to Afghanistan to perhaps the most famous and perilous example, the 1983 war scare produced by Soviet fears of an imminent U.S. nuclear strike. It was also a product of a related fact about Cold War clashes: despite immense intelligence apparatuses and decades-long personal ties, each side often had only the most rudimentary information about the other’s true thinking. Partly as a result, crisis signaling never worked as well in practice as in game theory. In the chaos of major clashes, signals were misinterpreted or ignored as often as accurately read.

But U.S. moderation through many Cold War crises also suggests a more reassuring lesson: Soviet imperial objectives were to some degree self-correcting in the responses they provoked from others. Before 1950, for example, the United States was not fully committed to the defense of either South Korea or Taiwan. It was willing, for a time, to assume that Taiwan would be reabsorbed into the new mainland regime. But the Soviet-sponsored invasion of South Korea changed all that, sparking renewed U.S. and allied defense investments and commitments. The Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 turned out to be strategically disastrous, alienating much of the nonaligned movement and speeding the collapse of domestic support for the Soviet system. The more belligerently aggressive Moscow became, the more it drove countries to seek implicit or explicit security help from the United States and its allies.

The world is seeing much the same dynamic play out with China today. The more it seeks to intimidate its neighbors and capture influence within the societies of other countries, the more it steals intellectual property and imposes elaborate technology transfer demands on foreign firms, the more Beijing alienates those it is trying to win over. With Europe imposing much stricter controls on technology cooperation, Japan considering a doubling of its defense budget, and countries throughout Asia accelerating networks of security cooperation, China’s most aggressive ambitions may turn out to be, like the Soviet Union’s, a self-correcting threat. This has implications for its goals: China may seek regional hegemony, but if it encounters more visceral opposition with every new step, it will have to recalibrate its objectives over time.

PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING CONFRONTATIONS

These sources of insight lead back to the central goal of this essay—to nominate principles for managing an era of persistent altercations within a combative rivalry with China. The Cold War lessons summarized above can help inform these principles. Those lessons highlight the possibility of a rival whose ambitions are substantial but not clearly defined. They warn of the risks of misinterpreting China’s true motives in any crisis and suggest that a long-term systemic rivalry will not be determined by almost any one clash—but they also emphasize the need to draw some clear limits to an aggressive state’s opportunism. They make clear the need to balance strength in any one standoff with the need to remain patient, signal a willingness to compromise—if such a step remains possible in the context of U.S. China Policy—and avoid escalation. And the Cold War experience hints that China’s belligerence will be partly self-correcting.
and that successive crises can be one tool for shifting the global alignment of power against Beijing. Seven principles for managing confrontations embody these lessons.

**PRINCIPLE ONE: ESTABLISH THE BOUNDARIES OF U.S. TOLERANCE.**

The first principle requires identifying the potential confrontations that would justify strong and determined responses, with either military force or a comprehensive nonmilitary campaign of cost imposition. These are the confrontations in which the United States would draw red lines to circumscribe the outer bounds of China’s territorial encroachment, identifying those commitments and interests that will generate a rapid and substantial U.S. military response. Some U.S. experience with China indicates that China does respect firm boundaries when others draw them, suggesting that the strictest red lines would largely be respected (except for Taiwan, discussed below).

Figure 1 suggests a rough categorization of potential crises along two indices: (1) the degree of U.S. national interests involved, and (2) the precedential importance of an issue in regulating Chinese ambitions. Confrontations that reflect high measures on both indices (the top-right box) would call forth a powerful and direct response. An example would be a massed Chinese maritime coercion campaign to impose Japanese withdrawal from the Senkakus: such a gambit would demand rapid and substantial U.S. military deployments, reaffirmations that any action against Japan would trigger the U.S.-Japan security treaty, and other steps. Once it has identified the issues in this quadrant, the United States would then make unequivocal deterrent threats around them to avoid clashes in the first place. It has begun to do this with actions such as the statement that the Senkakus fall under the U.S.-Japan security treaty and the 2019 clarification that “any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft or public vessels in the South China Sea would trigger mutual defense obligations under Article IV of our Mutual Defense Treaty.”

Yet the figure also highlights confrontations in which the United States would have more room for maneuver. The bottom-left corner includes issues that call for ongoing competition rather than risk-taking confrontations; when they flare into momentary public crises—such as the revelation of a specific Chinese human rights abuse or agreement to build a new military base—the United States could react calmly and indirectly. The most challenging quadrant to handle would be the bottom right: forms of Chinese coercion or outright aggression that threaten non-treaty allies, but which could, if successful, turbocharge Chinese ambitions. Here, the United States could potentially rally world opinion, support the beleaguered state in significant ways, or impose punishments on China, but not deploy forces or risk a direct confrontation.

**Figure 1: Categorizing Potential Confrontations**

![Figure 1: Categorizing Potential Confrontations](image)

This matrix does not distinguish crises based on who initiates confrontation, a crucial factor. The restrained U.S. approach in the recent Taiwan Strait Crisis was probably dictated in part by the role of U.S. actions in creating it. Whether a given crisis arises from U.S. or allied actions, or fully unprovoked Chinese belligerence, will have to be considered when categorizing a given confrontation and the appropriate responses.

One issue is notably absent from the figure—Taiwan. Much of the debate about U.S. policy really amounts to which cell it belongs in. Many would place it on the right-hand side, as a precedent-setting issue for Chinese ambitions—though some would disagree, suggesting that it is such a unique issue that it holds limited meaning for restraining wider Chinese ambitions. Most of the debate, though, will be about the lower-right versus upper-right cells. Is this an issue that, when crises erupt, the United States should signal a strong and immediate response, including military deployments and threats of escalation? This question is addressed below.

**PRINCIPLE TWO: EMPHASIZE UNDERSTANDING AND STRATEGIC EMPATHY.**

A major theme of Cold War crises was how often each side misread the intentions of its rival—and how dangerous such misperceptions could be. In the current rivalry, these risks may be compounded by China’s doctrinal
emphasis on moving rapidly, decisively, and violently at the beginning of a crisis or war to seize the strategic advantage. China’s own myopic conviction that its ambitions reflect a rightful demand for fair treatment may make it blind to the ways in which it generates crises, something the United States needs to understand and navigate around. In recent crises, U.S. signals of toughness, based on limited information about Chinese intentions, have arguably created unnecessary risk. And the history of Chinese crisis behavior suggests that, like most great powers, it is most likely to take risk and escalate events when it perceives itself in a domain of losses, under severe pressure, and losing strategic position and credibility.

It will therefore be essential for senior U.S. officials to put in place wide-ranging sources of information, from inside as well as outside government, and formal analytical products that constantly invite them to put themselves into the mindset of leaders in Beijing. This is easier said than done, and the hints of a new orthodoxy on China are already evident that will make it even tougher. It will demand committed effort from presidents and senior advisers to be sure they are drawing from the widest possible basis of information and interpretations—offices, products, and processes that go well beyond reporting on China to representing its mindset, as well as relationships between U.S. and Chinese officials that provide some basis for correcting misimpressions during future crises.

**PRINCIPLE THREE: KEEP FROM GENERATING CRISES OURSELVES, ESPECIALLY WITH UNNECESSARY POLITICAL PROVOCATIONS.**

There will be times when the United States believes it needs to take strong action on some issue in the relationship, actions China will view unfavorably. But Washington should avoid provoking unnecessary confrontations to the greatest degree possible. Partly this is simple resource management: Expending time, diplomatic capital, and military readiness on needless clashes is not good strategy. This imperative is partly about managing Chinese perceptions, avoiding, to the degree still possible (which may be limited), the idea that the United States is determined to challenge China in every opportunity. But it is also partly about sending a signal to third parties that both sides in this rivalry are not equally responsible for its most dangerous moments—that the United States, to the degree possible, seeks stability and China is the author of instability. All of those principles help to set the context for the successful resolution of individual confrontations.

More broadly, the challenge for the United States is to avoid the central source of instability when dealing with rising, dissatisfied powers—signaling that the only way for them to achieve their rightful place in world politics is through warfare. Accommodating some Chinese aims and ambitions is not only appropriate, it is essential if we are to avoid a bitterly zero-sum contest with an aggrieved and increasingly paranoid great power.

**PRINCIPLE FOUR: DEVELOP OPTIONS FOR SHORING UP CREDIBILITY AWAY FROM THE LOCAL CONFRONTATION.**

Any significant clash will raise the age-old issue of credibility and reputation, sparked by fears about the lessons that third parties will draw from U.S. conduct in such standoffs as well as concerns about domestic political costs of inaction. As noted, this concern for reputation can sometimes push great powers to take risks beyond those the interests at stake would seem to support. To avoid being trapped into excessive reactions out of a concern for credibility, the United States should identify indirect ways to shore it up—actions away from the local confrontation that signal U.S. strength and commitment without undertaking costly adventures. Partly this can involve preset options to quietly reset expectations in the wake of crises, including enhanced U.S. military posture, public statements of commitment to friends and allies, arms aid and transfers to partners, and expanded security cooperation activities. It can energize dialogues with U.S. friends and allies on shared steps to bolster collective credibility when a local military response is not judged to be sensible. None of this would involve starting new proxy conflicts or putting U.S. credibility on the line in new places or conflicts. The options would focus on reinforcing existing alliances and commitments to make clear that restraint in one confrontation will not produce a domino effect.

To avoid being trapped into excessive reactions out of a concern for credibility, the United States should identify indirect ways to shore it up—actions away from the local confrontation that signal U.S. strength and commitment without undertaking costly adventures.
PRINCIPLE FIVE: MULTILATERALIZE CONFRONTATIONS.
The United States has the great advantage of enjoying the active or tacit support of most key industrial powers, and most countries in Asia, in the effort to constrain the most aggressive forms of Chinese power. Both before and during crises, the United States should continue to seek to recruit collective support for norms and principles; then, when China prompts a clash with belligerent actions, it will face significant global criticism and confront a strong coalition of states insisting that it respect certain norms of conduct. One example is the growing European presence in Asia, in particular, conducting various forms of freedom of navigation demonstrations and security engagements with Asian nations.73 There is an ample institutional framework for such an effort, starting with the United Nations and running through bilateral and multilateral alliances, minilateral groupings such as the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) initiative, informal groups such as the Quad, and regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The United States will have uneven success in recruiting support in these venues depending on the nature of the crisis, but a major focus now can be to build a strong normative foundation for later support in crises. It would accelerate efforts to ensure that, especially in crises involving true U.S. red lines, China would confront a substantial coalition opposing its belligerence.

PRINCIPLE SIX: USE CONFRONTATIONS AS LEVERS TO SEEK COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE.
The United States should seek with every event not merely to fulfill its immediate interests but to rally world opinion against Chinese coercive provocations and put into place a gradually increasing deterrent posture in the region. After each crisis, for example, the United States can approach key regional actors, such as the Philippines, and propose slightly improved U.S. force presence and deepened bilateral training and exercise activities. It can try to ensure that each confrontation has some of the echo effect of major Soviet adventures in the Cold War, from Korea to Czechoslovakia to Afghanistan, in stiffening the commitment of other states to respond to the next provocation. To do this, however, the United States will need far better tools of informational statecraft to help shape opinions, especially in the developing world.

To reap such competitive benefits, the United States should develop concepts and capabilities to ensure that, once a confrontation is underway, the passage of time benefits the United States rather than China. Whether it is a maritime standoff over a set of disputed islands, a partial or complete quarantine of Taiwan, or another clash with the potential to last days, weeks, or even months, the side that accumulates more strength over time will have the advantage. If China believes it can outlast the United States, it will have every incentive to disregard short-term challenges and hold out to prevail.

PRINCIPLE SEVEN: USE EACH CONFRONTATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD COMMUNICATION CHANNELS, RULES OF ENGAGEMENT, AND NORMS OF CONDUCT.
The Cold War also highlights the role of mutual understandings in helping to manage the pressure-packed days or weeks of individual crises. A great risk with China today is that the formal crisis management mechanisms that do exist are embryonic, frequently ignored or bypassed, and not developed through mutual practice.74 Personal relationships between U.S. and Chinese officials are either nonexistent or, with a few exceptions, poorly developed. In some past crises, the absence of rapid U.S. responses to Chinese signals was potentially dangerous.75 In the wake of every crisis, the United States could approach China with an offer to jointly learn lessons and find ways of avoiding inadvertent escalation in future clashes, including through codified rules of engagement, mechanisms of communication, and informal standards of conduct. This is especially true at senior levels: Chinese habits of centralized decisionmaking and constraints on regular contacts at many levels may leave little room for strengthening rules of engagement from the bottom up. Senior U.S. officials and U.S. presidents should therefore use the aftermath of any crisis as an opportunity to argue for processes and contacts that improve mutual understanding, and mechanisms for easy conversation, at their level.

A great risk with China today is that the formal crisis management mechanisms that do exist are embryonic, frequently ignored or bypassed, and not developed through mutual practice.
WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE TAIWAN?

Those principles may work reasonably well for most U.S.-China confrontations, but they may be of less use on the dispute most likely to spark crises: the status of Taiwan. The issue resides in a vague middle ground between the two right-hand cells in Figure 1—possibly, but not necessarily, justifying inclusion with the clashes that would prompt an immediate and uncompromising U.S. response to Chinese coercive modes. That obscure status is becoming ever more complex and strewn with dilemmas. On the one hand, the case for the U.S. policy of ambiguity remains strong: to promise unqualified defense of the island would provoke China and possibly tempt Taiwan to take actions which would irretrievably inflame the issue.76 Signaling restraint to extend China’s timeline for achieving its interests, in part by “keeping the possibility of peaceful unification alive” to the degree possible, has been an essential component of maintaining peace.77 This has meant avoiding symbolic actions that will infuriate Beijing and doing everything possible to reintroduce a degree of patience.78

Sustaining that approach is critical and should be a U.S. policy priority. Yet it cannot be denied that all trends are now running in the direction of more formal U.S. commitments to defend Taiwan. Having watched the horrors of the Ukraine war unfold, the United States may now be far less likely to exercise similar restraint over Taiwan. President Biden has said multiple times that the United States would defend Taiwan, only to have his words walked back.79 The most recent of these statements implied the United States would fight even if Taiwan declared independence, a clear shift from existing policy.80 Meanwhile, Congress seems on the verge of passing a Taiwan Policy Act that would represent nothing short of a revolution in U.S. security relations with Taipei. There may now be no going back to the precise forms of mutual restraint around the Taiwan issue that helped produce relative stability for the last 30 years.81

The challenge of dealing with confrontations over Taiwan is further complicated by the fact that they may not represent an outright invasion. More likely is an interim series of crises below that threshold, intended to signal China’s determination and warn the United States, Taiwan, and others off any course that hints at de facto independence.82 Such moves could include repeated exercises, penetration of Taiwanese airspace, cyberattacks on Taiwan’s civilian and military infrastructure, large-scale political warfare, direct attacks on islands in the strait, attacks on undersea cables carrying internet connectivity to the island, temporary or quasi-permanent blockades of parts of the surrounding waterways, or an energy embargo.83 Even if Beijing does move toward a full invasion, it would have to undertake many forms of preparation—from months or years of surging defense production to national mobilization to more immediate movement of forces—that would create a crisis of impending war long before the invasion.84

There will be no simple playbook for U.S. responses to such a diverse array of actions, but the principles for managing persistent confrontations suggested above can still provide some guidance.85 First, the essential foundation for any U.S. approach to future crises should begin with an effort to reaffirm elements of stability to reset the context for future confrontations. If China comes to believe that the United States is inching toward open support for Taiwanese independence, it will have less incentive to restrain the escalatory dynamics of any crisis. It may be too late to resuscitate the comprehensive policy of ambiguity, but Washington can still offer a modified reassurance to Beijing. It can pledge that the One China Policy remains in place, indicate that the United States has no intention to formally recognize an independent Taiwan, and insist that both sides restrain actions that could lead to war. Washington could even publicly signal that a Taiwanese declaration of independence would void any U.S. promises. (In fact the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy came fairly close to saying all of this.86) In return it should request more consistent pledges from Beijing that it remains committed to the peaceful resolution of the issue, as it has long claimed.87 A mutually agreed series of such statements could move the public position of both sides back from the brink.

Second, however, and in tension with that effort, the United States now seems compelled to clarify its red lines for future Taiwan crises in ways more explicit than the policy of ambiguity had allowed. It could declare that an unprovoked Chinese attack on Taiwan proper would produce U.S. military involvement of some kind, leaving substantial leeway in terms of what military response it would undertake. It could continue to insist on freedom of navigation in international waters—including international maritime freedom to engage with Taiwan (thus placing a comprehensive Chinese blockade across the U.S. threshold of tolerance). This would amount to placing only the most severe confrontations in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1, actions that would trigger a U.S. military response in a crisis (such as large-scale military movements). Lesser contingencies—including Chinese cyberattacks, missile
flights, violations of Taiwan’s airspace, and even direct attacks on small islands in the strait—would fall into the lower-right quadrant and leave the United States with greater freedom of action in responding.  

Under such an approach, the United States would not reflexively seek to confront any Chinese coercive act around Taiwan. It would not adopt a policy of disrupting any Chinese exercises, flights, or sailings that cross certain territorial lines, unless they dealt with red-line issues. As in the recent strait crisis, it would take a largely hands-off approach unless there were clear actions or indications that China was preparing to violate one of the red-line issues. The approach aims to recreate, in miniature, the essential U.S. approach during the Cold War, combining firm commitment to a small number of essential red lines with flexibility on most other clashes. The result would split the difference on ambiguity, but in ways that do not reflect a major departure from U.S. policy, which has always insisted on a peaceful resolution of the issue and strongly hinted that the United States would respond militarily to an outright invasion.

Third, before or during a major crisis, the United States could follow other elements of the principles for managing confrontations suggested above. It could recruit statements from other countries insisting that China not use military force as well as expand multilateral exercises, sailings, and security cooperation efforts to make clear that an unprovoked use of force would put Beijing afoul of most of the world economy. For lesser contingencies where it chooses restraint, such as the recent crisis, the United States could undertake parallel actions to demonstrate strength, reassure regional actors, and reaffirm its credibility. It could finally get serious about its information instrument of statecraft and use Chinese belligerence to drive regional and global opinion during future skirmishes. At the same time, it would do everything possible to enhance channels of communication and personal relationships and approach Beijing after each clash to reaffirm key rules of the road.

Fourth and finally, this approach has implications for U.S. operational military posture in the region. A relatively calm and contained approach to many confrontations will have much greater credibility if the United States and Taiwan have a stronger persistent, preset ability to impose costs on aggression, rather than having to spend weeks or months flowing forces to the area. This demands, first and foremost, that Taiwan take stronger steps for its own defense. More spending, a true commitment to a more asymmetric emphasis, and a transformation of Taiwan’s reserve forces are minimum necessary steps. For the United States, this approach would call for more submarines; unmanned undersea systems; advanced sensing and targeting systems, including long-range drones; loitering munitions; some number of long-range precision fire systems (including bombers); and demonstrated offensive cyber capabilities. The United States would also need to design the highest-impact forces to be able to rapidly deploy to the region—even onto Taiwan—once it received unambiguous warning that China was assembling forces for a full, unprovoked invasion.

TOWARD A TEMPERATE STRATEGY FOR MANAGING CONFRONTATIONS

In conceptualizing the emerging U.S.-China rivalry, most U.S. officials and analysts have become accustomed to thinking of the competition as a persistent contest to shape measures of advantage on some grand long-term scoreboard. But an equally important set of choices will be episodic—the ways the United States approaches specific crises and confrontations to gain strategic advantage while avoiding conflict. It needs a strategy for managing such clashes as much as it requires a general approach to national competitive advantage.

But an equally important set of choices will be episodic—the ways the United States approaches specific crises and confrontations to gain strategic advantage while avoiding conflict. It needs a strategy for managing such clashes as much as it requires a general approach to national competitive advantage.
Having done these things, great powers can then be restrained in most individual crises beyond those issues or allies because they are not going to decide the outcome. Repeatedly in the Cold War, the United States responded to clashes with at least a degree of restraint—in Korea, Dien Bien Phu, Hungary, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. There is every reason to believe the same basic rule will hold in the rivalry with China: the United States cannot be so spring-loaded to respond that it turns every clash into an existential contest of wills. This suggests, on Taiwan and other issues, a challenging but manageable balancing act that combines strengthening the most essential commitments with a determination not to overreact to other issues.

One risk, at this point, is that the room in the U.S. national security context for compromise, understanding, and sensible accommodation appears to be narrowing rapidly. Especially with the recent announcement of understandable constraints on dealing with China’s semiconductor industry, the United States is giving every indication of viewing the rivalry in increasingly zero-sum terms. This will convince Chinese officials and commentators that their most pessimistic instincts have been correct: the United States has no intention of offering shared leadership of world politics. The policy case for each of these specific actions, such as information technology constraints or arms sales to Taiwan, may be compelling. But the sum of these actions is creating an environment in which Beijing has much less incentive to hold back when a crisis arrives because it thinks its rival is operating according to a zero-sum mindset.

Jessica Chen Weiss recently made an impassioned plea for strategic goals and direction in a U.S. China Policy rapidly being swallowed up by worst-case assumptions and zero-sum thinking. “U.S. politicians and policymakers are becoming so focused on countering China that they risk losing sight of the affirmative interests and values that should underpin U.S. strategy,” she argues. U.S. policy “has struggled to define success” in the overall competition and has become dangerously reactive and, at times, exaggerated. As a result, “Both countries are intent on doing whatever is necessary to demonstrate that any move by the other will not go unmet.” The same dynamic could easily come to characterize the U.S. approach to specific crises. In its approach to the periodic clashes that will increasingly come to characterize this relationship, no less than in the overarching rivalry, the United States needs a positive strategy for success.

There is every reason to believe the same basic rule will hold in the rivalry with China: the United States cannot be so spring-loaded to respond that it turns every clash into an existential contest of wills.

---

CSIS BRIEFS are produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2022 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.  
Cover Photo: China Photos/Getty Images
ENDNOTES


Some of these actions were less of a precedent than it seemed at the time. Chinese officials had already been claiming, for example, that “There is no so-called median line in the Strait” since 2020, and PLAAF aircraft had been crossing that line for several years in ways that had already led some observers to describe a “new normal” well before the current crisis. Mathieu Duchâtel, “An Assessment of China’s Options for Military Coercion of Taiwan,” in Joel Wuthnow et al., eds., Crossing the Strait: China’s Military Preparations for War with Taiwan (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2022), 95, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/Crossing-the-Strait/. For an assessment of the event on Chinese public opinion, see Leo Chu, “How Pelosi’s Visit to Taiwan Drove Chinese Public Opinion Toward Reunification by Force,” The Diplomat, August 19, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/how-pelosis-visit-to-taiwan-drove-chinese-public-opinion-toward-reunification-by-force/.


8 For a broad summary of the factors leading to a more confrontational relationship, see Michael J. Mazarr et al., Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RA456-1.html.


14 As Robert Jervis argued, “Although the Cold War contained elements of the security dilemma and included episodes in which tensions
and arms increased as each side defensively reacted to the other, the root of the conflict at best was a clash of social systems. Mutual security in these circumstances was a goal that could not be attained. For the Soviet Union, mutual security was not a goal at all if ‘security’ is equated with maintaining the status quo.” Robert Jervis, “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 58, doi:10.1162/15203970151032146. See Michael J. Mazarr, “The Essence of the Strategic Competition with China,” *PRISM* 9, no. 1 (October 2020), https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2383026/the-essence-of-the-strategic-competition-with-china/.

In this it reflected a larger historical truth: as one recent RAND study argued, nations which excel in an identifiable set of characteristics, from national unity to shared opportunity and a learning and adapting spirit, tend to succeed in global rivalries. Michael J. Mazarr, *The Societal Foundations of National Competitiveness* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA499-1.html.


21 Its latest concept on this front is the grandly titled Global Security Initiative (GSI), a typically vague notion introduced with the sort of sweeping phrases that have come to characterize Chinese diplomatic initiatives. The foreign minister said that the initiative “contributes China’s wisdom to the efforts of mankind.” Michael Schuman, “How China Wants to Replace the U.S. Order,” *The Atlantic*, July 13, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/07/china-xi-jinping-global-security-initiative/670504/. For an argument about the systemic character of the competition, see Michael J. Mazarr and Tim McDonald, “Competing for the System,” RAND Corporation, forthcoming October 2022.

22 Some would argue that Taiwan would in fact be such a decisive single confrontation. Yet as important as issues like semiconductor vulnerability may be, a U.S.-China rivalry would persist long past an invasion and be ultimately determined by what happens afterward rather than the invasion itself.


28 The Cold War does suggest that distinguishing these categories—the vital from the secondary crises—is difficult, and each side will sometimes get those judgments wrong. The significance of crises over specific issues can also change over time.


31 A very fine discussion of Kennan’s views on the point is Louis Menand, “Getting Real: George F. Kennan’s Cold War,” *The


Rush Doshi, The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5. Doshi admits that these very specific and ambitious statements are his inferences from Chinese writings. “More authoritative sources,” he explains, “put this approach in less sweeping terms.” When Aaron Friedberg concludes that China cannot achieve its goals “if the United States maintains anything resembling its present position in Asia,” he is making that leap himself, based on more abstract comments from Chinese scholars and officials. Aaron Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 166. Another example of this pattern can be found in Kenton Thibaut, Chinese Discourse Power: Aspirations, Reality, and Ambitions in the Digital Domain (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, August 2022), 2, 4, 9, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/chinese-discourse-power-ambitions-and-reality-in-the-digital-domain/. The author characterizes Chinese ambitions with terms such as “command the digital world,” “supplant the current liberal international order,” and “creating a China-centered alternative international order,” which are all interpretive summaries of a wide range of diverse Chinese statements.


Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy, 156.

Heath, Grossman, and Clark, China’s Quest for Global Primacy, xv–xvi, 5.

Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy, 144, 164.

Doshi, for example, cites many comments to this effect, such as “For the rise of China, it is more important to strive for the support of many neighboring countries,” and “a good periphery is vital for China to be a global power.” Doshi, The Long Game, 173–174. See also Tang Shiping, “Revisiting China’s Grand Strategy,” August 5, 2001, www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order/.

Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy, 156.

Ibid., 157, 123, 120.

Heath, Grossman, and Clark, China’s Quest for Global Primacy, xv–xvi, 5.

Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy, 144, 164.

Doshi, for example, cites many comments to this effect, such as “For the rise of China, it is more important to strive for the support of many neighboring countries,” and “a good periphery is vital for China to be a global power.” Doshi, The Long Game, 173–174. See also Tang Shiping, “Revisiting China’s Grand Strategy,” August 5, 2001, translated and posted by CSIS, “Interpret China,” https://interpreter.csis.org/translations/revisiting-chinas-grand-strategy/. He argues that “in the process of China becoming a ‘responsible power,’ China should only assume such responsibilities that earn it the support and acceptance of other countries.”

One can imagine issues on which risk-acceptant behavior would be perceived as essential, rather than threatening, to continued CCP rule. These typically involve cases where China is placed into a domain of such dramatic expected losses that it believes it must act, or see its political legitimacy threatened. Crises generated by Chinese belligerence alone are not likely to have this character—but putting the CCP into a use-or-lose scenario with Taiwan could do so.


Jane Perlez, Mark Landler, and Choe Sang-Hun, “China Blinks on South Korea, Making Nice After a Year of Hostilities,” New York Times, November 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/world/asia/china-south-korea-thaad.html. The decision, the story concludes, “appeared to reflect a judgment that China’s continued opposition to the deployment of the American missile defense system was not succeeding in fraying the South Korean government’s alliance with Washington.”


Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy, 174. He wrote this a decade ago. Doshi and others might suggest that Chinese thinking, partly under the influence of Xi Jinping, has become far more aggressive since then.


An excellent snapshot of U.S. thinking on Czechoslovakia is captured in a September 4 NSC meeting. See “Summary Notes of the 590th Meeting of the National Security Council, September 4, 1968 (Excerpts),” in Jaromir Navrátil, Malcolm Byrne, Peter Kornbluh, eds., The Prague Spring, 1968 (Budapest: Central European Press, 2006), 492–96.

The fate of Cuba was not essential to the Soviet system, for example, yet Nikita Khrushchev was willing to risk global catastrophe over the island. See William Taubman, Khrushchev and His Era (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 529–77.


This history is brilliantly told in Finkelstein, Washington’s Taiwan Dilemma.


In a sense this lesson argues that of Doshi’s proposed “three broad forms of control,” “excessive pursuit of the first—coercive capability—trades off against the other two (‘consensual inducements’ and legitimacy). Doshi, The Long Game, 3. A great power cannot maximize all three at the same time. Friedberg notes that China’s combination of goals—winning all of its territorial disputes and forcing the United States out of the region while at the same time keeping Japan quiescent—is a severe dilemma, and “It is not obvious that a solution to this puzzle actually exists.” Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy, 174.

A nice overarching summary of this process is Elizabeth Economy, “Xi Jinping’s New World Order: Can China Remake the International System?” Foreign Affairs 101, no. 1 (January/February 2022).


82 Saunders, “Three Logics of Chinese Policy Toward Taiwan,” 57; and Duchâtel, “An Assessment of China’s Options,” 100.


85 Michael Mazza lays out a very similar agenda for stabilizing the Taiwan situation, combining enhanced deterrent strength and some degree of clarity about responding to an unprovoked invasion with mitigating Chinese worries about Taiwan’s status; see Mazza, “War Over Taiwan Is Nowhere Near Inevitable,” Foreign Policy, October 6, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/06/china-taiwan-war-not-inevitable-path-to-peace/. Another recent essay laying out a similar combination of steps is Task Force on U.S.-China Policy, “Avoiding War Over Taiwan,” University of California at San Diego, School of Global Policy and Strategy, October 12, 2022, https://china.ucsd.edu/policy/task-force/policy-brief-taiwan.html.


The 1972 and 1982 communiques both refer to the peaceful unification of Taiwan as a component of the U.S. preferred outcome and promised strongly that promised U.S. reductions in support for Taiwan are tied to that expectation. The Taiwan Relations Act is very explicit that “The United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means and that any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes is considered a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States. States that the United States shall provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character and shall maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan.” U.S. Congress, House, “Taiwan Relations Act,” H.R. 2470, 96th cong., 1st sess., introduced February 28, 1979, https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479.

Patrick Porter and the author argued that the United States has many such opportunities: bolstering U.S. forward deployments in allied countries, agreeing to enhanced posture in partner nations, making additional commitments of military support to partners in the region, accelerated deployment of added military capabilities in Asia, and more. Michael J. Mazarr and Patrick Porter, *Countering China’s Adventurism Over Taiwan: A Third Way* (Sydney, Australia: The Lowy Institute, May 2021), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep33506.

On the theme of Taiwan’s need to do more, see Tanner Greer, “Why I Fear for Taiwan,” *The Scholar’s Stage*, September 11, 2020, https://scholars-stage.org/why-i-fear-for-taiwan/.


These would presumably build on current test bed units, such as the Army’s Multi-Domain Task Force and the Marine Littoral Regiment, to offer deadly punch in areas of anti-ship, anti-air, and electronic warfare capabilities among others.