

The time is right for US-China nuclear dialogue

by Ralph A. Cossa and John K. Warden

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As part of the so-called ‘new type of major-country relations,’ there has been a proliferation of official dialogues between the United States and China. But, in the area where mistakes or miscalculation could prove the most disastrous – nuclear weapons policy – Beijing has resisted elevating very constructive unofficial Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogues (involving government and military officials in their private capacities, along with outside scholars and experts) to the official Track 1 level. A meaningful official dialogue on strategic nuclear issues is needed to prevent lingering suspicion and distrust about each other’s capabilities and intentions from damaging overall US-China relations. This will not happen, however, until Washington accommodates what Beijing perceives to be its legitimate security concerns and clarifies its own objectives, and Beijing realizes that further delay could undermine its long-term interests.

There are many outstanding issues between the United States and China and even more reasons to think that competition between the two Asia-Pacific powers will intensify. Nonetheless, the two countries have been able to navigate a number of difficult issues. During President Barack Obama’s visit to China in November 2014, the two countries [finalized accords](#) to limit greenhouse gas emissions, notify each other of major military activities, relax tariffs on semiconductors, and allow 10-year tourist and business visas. Chinese President Xi Jinping is also scheduled to conduct a state visit to the United States in September 2015 – a positive sign for further cooperation.

But Washington and Beijing are not doing enough to take advantage of the positive atmosphere. Since early in the first Obama term, US officials have, through public and private channels, asked Chinese counterparts to discuss nuclear forces, posture, and doctrine, but have been consistently rebuffed. Beijing has stuck to its policy of strategic ambiguity, arguing that, as the weaker power, greater transparency regarding its nuclear forces is inappropriate. Washington, for its part, has been unable to satisfactorily address Beijing’s apprehensions. As a result, these critical discussions occur only in unofficial channels.

Make no mistake, [nuclear-focused Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogues](#) between the United States and China have made important progress. At the 9th iteration of the [China-US Dialogue on Strategic Nuclear Dynamics](#) – hosted by the Pacific Forum CSIS and the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies – US and Chinese experts, officials, and military officers (all in their private capacities)

discussed the strategic landscape, nuclear dimensions of a ‘new type of major-country relations,’ strategic stability and reassurance, and crisis management. Over the years, these discussions have given US experts greater insight into China’s nuclear thinking – knowledge that has filtered into the US government. For China, the Track 1.5/2 process has, according to a prominent Chinese participant, generated expertise and the ability to explain China’s policies and concerns, helped to form an internal consensus among the Chinese academic community, and, through direct channels to top leaders, shaped China’s policies.

Despite these successes, unofficial dialogues have been unable to generate sufficient momentum for official talks, in part because, without a major nuclear crisis, other issues have taken precedence. But time is on no one’s side. Rightly or wrongly, the view that China refuses to participate in a Track 1 nuclear dialogue because it has something to hide – perhaps hostile intent, a much larger nuclear arsenal than has been reported, or a doctrine that diverges from its public no-first-use pledge – is gaining traction in Washington. Even those most favorable to engagement with China are beginning to run out of patience. The Pentagon, according to well-informed former officials, is becoming frustrated, and the Congress is even more suspicious.

Washington has already [expressed concern](#) about China’s development and testing of missile defense and anti-satellite capabilities, and apprehensiveness will grow as China advances its submarine-launched ballistic missile program and deploys more capable long-range missiles with multiple independent reentry vehicles. Many US analysts speculate that these changes will cause China to revisit its nuclear doctrine or seek a much larger force. Beijing, on the other hand, will question the continued survivability of China’s second-strike nuclear forces as the United States modernizes its nuclear forces, moves forward with long-range conventional strike, and expands the size and sophistication of its missile defense architecture. Track 1.5/2 dialogues can explore these issues, but the reassurances that both sides seek can only come from governments. Therefore, frank, official discussions must commence before distrust becomes ingrained and undermines the tentative ‘strategic stability’ that both sides have worked hard to create.

For Track 1 dialogue to proceed, Washington must tailor its request by accepting caveats from Beijing about what form the discussions should take and what topics to include. First, rather than establishing a new mechanism, Washington should propose taking advantage of existing vehicles such as the strategic track of the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Second, dialogue should be initiated at the policy, rather than the operational, level – between the US Department of Defense and the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, not STRATCOM and the 2nd Artillery. Chinese

interlocutors have argued that, at least on their side, operators are ill-equipped to meaningfully discuss China's strategy and doctrine. Third, Washington should avoid drawing parallels to US-USSR strategic talks. US-China dialogue must occur between partners looking to enhance stability, a dynamic that is difficult to maintain with regular reference to the Cold War. Moreover, in the US-Soviet relationship, 'strategic stability' equated to parity and mutually assured destruction, an unworkable formulation in the US-China relationship.

US-China strategic dialogue must also be narrowly focused. While the two sides have yet to settle on a common definition of 'strategic stability,' it remains a useful catch-all for talks that focus on the interaction between strategic capabilities – nuclear, space, cyber, missile defense, and long-range strike—and the need to avoid miscalculation during crises. Washington, however, must accept that the level of transparency it desires is – at least initially – not in the cards. Rather than focusing on the number of warheads deployed or the maximum range of missiles, the two sides should discuss the role of US extended deterrence, the interaction between various strategic capabilities, the impact of a changing conventional balance in the western Pacific on nuclear deterrence, the risk of miscalculation due to collocated forces, dual-use radars, and command and control capabilities, and the need to correctly interpret signals about military buildups and limited uses of military force during crises. These discussions can build to more specific exchanges about operational capabilities once a certain comfort level has been achieved.

Finally, the United States and China must raise the bar regarding what constitutes cooperation. Dialogue on strategic forces must go beyond mere exchanges of views and aim to develop and implement [concrete confidence-building measures](#) that enhance mutual trust and decrease the prospect of crisis instability and the likelihood of an arms race. A good place to start would be a [mechanism for reciprocal advance launch notification](#) for long-range missile systems, which could be [implemented as an annex](#) to the November 2014 "Notification of Major Military Activities" agreement. Such a mechanism would ensure that launches are not misinterpreted and reduce misunderstanding about each country's capabilities and testing regime. It would also lay the groundwork for further confidence-building measures and eventually an arms-control relationship.

Assessing the US-China nuclear relationship, optimists highlight an overall positive trend that provides an opportunity for productive discussions, while pessimists warn that a contentious adversarial outlook may be around the corner. Either way, the time is right for an official US-China nuclear dialogue.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.