

China-US Dialogue on Strategic Nuclear Dynamics
Washington, DC – March 22-23, 2017
Key Findings

The Pacific Forum CSIS, with support from NPS/PASCC and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, held a China-US Dialogue on Strategic Nuclear Dynamics in Washington, DC on March 22-23, 2017. More than 40 Chinese and US experts, officials, military officers, and observers met in their private capacities to discuss US-China strategic relations with an emphasis on its nuclear dimension. The off-the-record discussions covered comparative assessments of US-China strategic relations, organizing principles, the concept of integrated strategic deterrence, potential areas for US-China nuclear cooperation, and approaches for preventing and managing crises with North Korea. Key findings included:

While US and Chinese participants expressed some optimism about the state of US-China relations, noting areas of progress and possible areas for future cooperation, they expressed significant uncertainty about the trajectory of the relationship and concern about increased competitive pressures under the Trump administration (regarding nuclear modernization, missile defense, and generally, a hawkish tone on China). Chinese interlocutors wanted to know whether major changes in US China policy or US nuclear policy were forthcoming. All agreed that the Mar-a-Lago Summit would be important for setting the tone for the US-China relationship under the new US administration.

Both sides saw “strategic stability” as an important organizing principle for their nuclear relationship, even though the United States and China have not developed an official understanding of either the concept or the actions that each side should take to promote strategic stability. Nevertheless, Chinese interlocutors emphasized that within the narrow confines of strategic specialists, the term was understood in similar ways to its U.S. usage. Chinese interlocutors further described the phrase as an important indication of US desire for a constructive rather than confrontational relationship. If the upcoming US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) does not include the concept, it will raise questions about Washington’s future intentions.

US participants bemoaned China’s refusal to accept earlier offers to have an official dialogue on the narrow, nuclear elements of strategic stability and hoped that Beijing would be more willing to engage on the topic during the Trump administration. US and Chinese experts saw value in a bilateral experts exchange in advance of the NPR to discuss the global and regional nuclear landscape, projections of US and Chinese nuclear capabilities, and views on shared security challenges. Chinese participants raised concerns about the NPR and BMDR being a military (rather than interagency) effort, about shifting language in Congressional MDAA guidance on BMD policy, and US participants reminded Chinese interlocutors that the NPR is not all, or even primarily, about China.

Chinese participants welcomed comments by Secretary of State Tillerson in Beijing that seemed to endorse China’s concept of a “new type of major country relations.” US participants cautioned that China should not read too much into Tillerson’s use of Chinese phraseology. US participants suggested that the most productive way for China to react to Tillerson’s remarks would be to offer true “win-win” proposals. Non-controversial areas of cooperation might include a joint US-China statement on principles, Chinese participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative, and US-China cooperation to prevent a nuclear crisis between India and Pakistan.

Taiwan—an issue that has been largely absent from this dialogue for several years—is once

again a potential flashpoint in the US-China relationship. With the return of the DPP to power, there is growing consternation in Beijing about Taipei's policy toward the mainland. Beijing's concerns are magnified by worry about the Trump administration's policy toward Taiwan. While the United States and China avoided a confrontation when Trump accepted the one China policy, there remains a real risk of an escalating Taiwan crisis. Chinese participants were concerned that the Trump administration might dramatically increase the quality and quantity of arms sales to Taiwan. Several participants worried that Xi might attempt to make Taiwan a legacy issue (one Chinese participant provocatively suggested exactly that) and establish benchmarks or a timeline for reunification.

All participants understood that North Korea will be an important early bellwether of US-China cooperation. If China is seen as assisting the United States in slowing or rolling back the development of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, then greater US-China cooperation will likely follow. If Chinese support of US North Korea policy is not forthcoming, then it may make other areas of the US-China relationship more difficult, in part because the United States will likely take actions such as deploying additional missile defense and strike capabilities in Northeast Asia to address the North Korean threat that will also upset Beijing.

Even though US participants noted the real and growing North Korean nuclear weapons and missile threat, Chinese participants repeatedly and aggressively denounced the US deployment of THAAD to South Korea and dismissed US assurances that it did not threaten China's nuclear deterrent. US participants argued that unfounded Chinese objections have stiffened South Korean resolve to accept THAAD and make future US-China cooperation aimed at enhancing strategic stability more difficult.

Chinese participants insisted that China, not North Korea, is the real target of the US THAAD deployment and sought greater reassurance from the United States. Various Chinese participants had different suggestions: that the United States build a physical barrier next to the AN/TPY-2 radar to prevent it from looking toward China; operate the THAAD system in South Korea with a different, less capable radar; or set clear, public limits on future deployments of missile defense in northeast Asia. They warned that a failure to reassure China would cause Beijing to improve and expand China's nuclear forces and would limit cooperation in other areas. Americans saw Chinese complaints as more political than technical (a point acknowledged by a few Chinese participants), while reminding Chinese counterparts of US offers to provide technical briefings on THAAD.

US and Chinese participants agreed that North Korea is making rapid progress toward deployment of a more advanced nuclear weapons force and that prospects for denuclearization appear slim. Chinese participants expressed exasperation with Kim Jong Un, but reiterated that China has a strong interest in keeping North Korea as a buffer and that negotiations are the only way to deescalate the situation. They advised that the best path forward would be for the United States and South Korea to not advocate preemptive strikes, to continue to refuse to deploy nuclear weapons in Japan and South Korea, and to find an alternative to THAAD.

US participants were skeptical that negotiations with North Korea would yield a mutually acceptable outcome and stressed Washington's growing frustration with Beijing's failure to more effectively pressure Pyongyang, arguing that the current trajectory of the DPRK nuclear and missile program is unacceptable. There was bilateral agreement on the need to discuss crisis management in the event of a nuclear accident in North Korea or another North Korean nuclear test. US participants suggested that it would also be beneficial to discuss high-end contingencies, such as a collapse of the Kim regime or an escalating war between North and South Korea, since

Beijing and Washington would likely have very different objectives in many crisis scenarios, making cooperation and coordination ahead of time all the more important.

There remains little agreement about the impact of advanced space, cyber, and conventional weapons capabilities on strategic stability and nuclear deterrence. Both the United States and China are thinking about how deterrence functions across multiple domains, developing concepts such as integrated strategic deterrence, cross-domain deterrence, comprehensive deterrence, or multi-domain deterrence. In a crisis or conflict where military operations are occurring across multiple domains, signaling will be especially difficult, increasing the chances of misperception and inadvertent escalation. One Chinese interlocutor suggested a hierarchy across these issue areas, with nuclear at the top; another emphasized they were separate domains with limited interaction. Group discussions continue on establishing rules of the road to avoid unintended confrontations.

While many areas of misunderstanding and disagreement remain, US and Chinese participants nonetheless highlighted the benefits of the Track 1.5/2 forum. Frank and open discussions allow US and Chinese experts to hear the suspicions and concerns of the other side, discuss issues that are too sensitive for official dialogue, and identify, debate, and refine proposals that can feed into official US-China dialogue. But US participants again reiterated that Track 1.5/2 needs to be a supplement to, not replacement for, official dialogue.

For more information, please contact Ralph A. Cossa [ralph@pacforum.org]. These preliminary findings are aimed at providing a general summary of the discussion. They are the result of research supported by the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (PASCC). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of NPS or imply endorsement of the US government. A more detailed summary of the dialogue will soon be available upon request from the Pacific Forum CSIS.