

MITIGATING THE DANGER OF NUCLEAR ESCALATION IN A WESTERN PACIFIC CRISIS

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The potential of a crisis between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is an inherently chilling proposition. Beyond the substantial loss of life that could be expected to accompany any conventional confrontation the existence of strategic nuclear forces on both sides raises the specter of inadvertent nuclear escalation. During the recently concluded 11th US-China Strategic Dialogue held in Maui US and PRC participants gathered to exchange views on the state of nuclear deterrence in the region. Participants identified a variety of potential drivers of inadvertent escalation, including practical difficulties involved in differentiating nuclear forces from conventional forces, the commingling of Nuclear Command, Control and Communications (N3) with conventional Command and Control (C2) capabilities, and a lack of mutual understanding regarding the scope of US policy under the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review.

Concerns over the distinguishability of nuclear forces were primarily raised by US participants. US participants noted that discriminating between nuclear and conventional PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) transporter-erector-launchers (TELS) would represent a particular challenge in a crisis situation. This raises the prospect of inadvertent destruction of PLARF nuclear missile systems, which would cause conventional forces to unknowingly degrade the PRC's nuclear deterrent. In a similar vein, US participants also expressed concern over

potential difficulties differentiating between PLA Navy ballistic missile submarines and attack submarines. During a conventional conflict any unintentional destruction of PLA nuclear-capable forces, to include SSBNs, would degrade the PLA's nuclear deterrent, and potentially lead PRC policy makers to erroneously conclude that opposing forces were engaging in a deliberate effort to remove the PLA's ability to deter an external nuclear attack. Such an assessment could drive an increase in PLA nuclear forces' readiness posture, and thereby create an unintentional cycle of escalation.

US participants also raised questions regarding the dangers of comingling N3 and C2 functions. This largely reflects the fact that while US nuclear forces are organizationally and operationally distinct, falling under the aegis of US Strategic Command, PLA nuclear forces remain more closely tied to their individual branch of service. The most prominent concern on behalf of US participants was the dual-role of the PLARF, which provides both strategic (nuclear) deterrence and conventional medium and long-range precision fires ([China Brief](#)). The potential ability of the PLARF to degrade US power projection in the Western Pacific has been the topic of intense public discussion ([RAND/USCC](#)). To the extent that degradation of the PLARF's C2 networks during a conventional conflict would adversely impact the responsiveness of its subordinate nuclear forces comingling N3 and C2 could create substantial risk of nuclear escalation. Inadvertent degradation of N3 systems could serve to drive an increase in PLA nuclear forces' readiness posture, including the preemptive dispersal of TELS, leading to unintentional escalation.

The potential danger inherent in lack of shared understanding regarding new language in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review became apparent over the course of the conference. During one session a PRC participant raised the potential that US early warning satellites may be destroyed during a regional conflict. This prompted a visceral reaction from multiple US participants, who pointed to the importance that the US places on maintaining the integrity of its early warning systems. It was noted that under

the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review "attacks on U.S. or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities" were included as extreme circumstances under which the US may consider the employment of nuclear weapons. Clearly there is additional work needed to clarify the exact definition and delineation of key terms.

Despite all of the misunderstandings and misgivings that were identified over the course of the dialogue, there remain a number of options for policy-makers on both sides to improve mutual understanding and reduce the risk of nuclear escalation. The role of the Nuclear Risk Reduction Center (NRRC) as a durable channel of communications, for the transfer of relevant technical data and arms control notifications during pre-crisis situations, and for direct dialogue during periods of tensions, should be viewed as a model of effective bilateral confidence building measures. One avenue for increasing transparency and improving crisis communication would be to expand the mandate of the NRRC by concluding new bilateral agreements to allow data exchanges with the PRC. Alternatively, policy makers could establish a parallel set of institutions designed along the lines of the NRRC dedicated solely to data exchanges with the PRC. In the long term policy makers on both sides could also explore the possibility of selectively disclosing a portion of their N3 architecture, and pre-identifying potential operating areas for mobile nuclear forces, in order to begin establishing baseline expectations regarding which assets and areas would be considered most critical to maintaining strategic deterrence in a crisis scenario. These disclosures would create a level of mutual vulnerability but could also aid in crisis management by providing a more clearly defined set of expectations for decision-makers on both sides.

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