



## WHAT SHOULD WASHINGTON EXPECT FROM US-CHINA STRATEGIC STABILITY TALKS?

BY DAVID SANTORO

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National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [said](#) that US President Joe Biden proposed strategic stability talks to Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping during their virtual meeting on Nov. 15 and that “the two leaders agreed that we would look to begin to carry forward discussions on strategic stability.”

The United States has long sought such discussions with China, but Beijing has invariably declined, arguing that “conditions are not ripe” because the US nuclear arsenal is much larger than China’s. Yet while promising that it would stick to “minimum deterrence” (codewords for a small nuclear force), Beijing has been growing its arsenal and, per [recent evidence](#), this growth is advancing much faster than anticipated, with no end in sight.

If strategic stability talks take place, what should Washington expect?

The findings of unofficial US-China meetings offer insights. In the absence of official strategic stability talks, these meetings were, for a long time, [the only game in town](#). They stopped as the broader US-China relationship deteriorated, but some have resumed recently, and they provide important lessons for Washington. I offer five here.

### **Lesson #1: Expect to be blamed**

Beijing will air grievances and appear largely dismissive to US (and allied) concerns. Beijing justifies its military build-up by pointing to “US aggressive moves,” including efforts to build a coalition of democracies against China. Washington will hear criticisms of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) pact, Beijing’s new *bête noire*. US explanations that Beijing’s actions have triggered those developments will fall on deaf ears, and Washington will be told to be “more rational” and to abandon its “Cold-War mentality” and its quest for “absolute security.”

Of course, Beijing will also accuse Washington of changing its policy vis-à-vis Taiwan, notably by deploying troops there and by suggesting that the United States has defense commitments with Taipei.

As a result, while Beijing will say that it wants to improve the bilateral relationship, it will not articulate specific actions China should take to that end. For Beijing, the United States has destabilized the relationship and therefore the responsibility for stabilizing it rests on Washington.

### **Lesson #2: Expect challenges to insulate the nuclear dimension from broader competition**

Beijing will express rhetorical support for attempts to insulate the nuclear dimension of the relationship from competitive dynamics in broader US-China relations, but it will also stress that such dynamics make it difficult for China not to compete in the nuclear domain.

Beijing will insist that it is not a “revisionist state,” unlike the United States, which has withdrawn from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and Open Skies treaties, is developing low-yield nuclear weapons, and is refusing to cooperate on peaceful nuclear uses. For Beijing, these actions “prove” that the United States is not sincere about strategic stability and, after AUKUS, nonproliferation.

Still, Beijing will stress that China and the United States should commit to never fighting a war,

especially a nuclear war. Expect reference to the Reagan-Gorbachev 1985 [statement](#) that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” and a push for China and the United States to issue a similar statement.

Beijing, however, will go on to say that the chances of war will decrease if the United States refrains from deploying missile defenses or INF-range missiles in the Indo-Pacific. Read: Problems will go away if the United States lets China dominate the region. When Washington refuses and cites alliance commitments (which allies want strengthened because they fear China), Beijing will use this as evidence of US “nuclear aggressiveness.”

### **Lesson #3: Expect major disagreements over nuclear plans and strategies**

Beijing will be angered that China is—will be—a major focus of the key US strategic reviews, notably the Nuclear Posture Review.

Beijing will dismiss US claims that China is now a US “nuclear near-peer” due to qualitative and quantitative force improvements, and possible posture change (to launch-under-attack). It will object that Chinese modernization complicates US-Russia nuclear reductions. It will reject arguments that the United States might consider building its arsenal back up (because it now has two major nuclear-armed adversaries, Russia *and* China) and that in response to requests from US allies, it might focus extended deterrence on China, not just North Korea.

Beijing will also reject the idea that it is politically impossible for Washington to acknowledge US-China mutual vulnerability—a goal that China has long sought. It will dismiss the charge that the apparent scope and scale of the Chinese build-up (and its openness) suggests that China has given up on nuclear stability with the United States.

Instead, Beijing will maintain that Chinese nuclear strategy remains consistent and continues to be based on the same principles it laid out after it exploded its first nuclear device in 1964. These include the development of a small nuclear force and its use

strictly for deterrence purposes, not warfighting. Beijing will stress that Chinese modernization aims solely to ensure that its forces remain survivable, and it will point to its no-first-use policy as the best example of China’s restraint. Beijing will dismiss “US media and think-tank speculations” about Chinese nuclear activities but insist that modernization is essential because China faces a “grave threat” from the United States.

Beijing will express skepticism over US claims that Washington has maintained a restrained posture in the Indo-Pacific, and that US missile defenses are limited. It will point to the US intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technologies, arguing that China does not worry just about US firepower, but is also concerned by the US ability to search, locate, and neutralize Chinese forces.

### **Lessons #4: Expect crisis management to have potential**

Beijing will reject limits on, let alone reduction of, its strategic weapons, but support efforts to avoid or manage crises and escalation. In other words, arms control is out, and crisis management is in.

Beijing may agree to a “multi-tiered crisis management dialogue” where the two countries define “basic principles” and explain perspectives on issues that concern the other. For instance, that could translate into the United States providing information about its damage-limitation and left-of-launch strategies in exchange for China explaining its co-location of nuclear and conventional systems.

Beijing may also agree to improve implementation of existing crisis management mechanisms, strengthen them, and develop new ones, especially those that address risks in the space and cyber domains, and with artificial intelligence. Beijing may support establishment of an emergency management office. Of course, also expect Beijing to say that a US-China no-first-use policy would reduce the odds of a crisis and, in the event of a crisis, decrease the risks of nuclear escalation.

Cooperation will not be smooth, however. Beijing will warn that a “lack of trust” between the two countries is an impediment to progress and charge Washington with creating “the conditions of cooperation.” Consistent with Lesson #1—that problems in the relationship are the fault of the United States—it will call out Washington for “creating crises with China or near Chinese territory” and demanding that Beijing manage them. Beijing may also make “issue linkages,” saying Chinese cooperation on crisis management will be difficult without US “flexibility” on trade, technology, or another issue.

### **Lesson #5: Expect cooperation on some non-bilateral nuclear issues**

Beijing will show interest in joint work on nuclear security. It will want to engage with Washington to advance the multilateral arms control and nonproliferation regimes, including the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, International Atomic Energy Agency, Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, and Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Beijing will also voice support for US-China efforts to address proliferation crises, but cooperation will remain limited. For instance, while recognizing that North Korea is a problem, Beijing will assert that it can be solved if the United States offered “reasonable security guarantees” to Pyongyang, granted sanctions relief, and normalized US-North Korea relations. Short of that, Beijing will continue to argue that the United States is the problem and confirm the suspicion that it is “using North Korea to justify its regional alliances.”

### **Bottom line: Keep expectations low and get ready for the long haul**

Washington, then, should have low expectations for US-China strategic stability talks. Profound differences and disagreements mean that discussions will be difficult and frustrating, and it will take time to produce deliverables.

Focusing on crisis management shows some promise, however, and joint work on non-bilateral issues may help build a framework for cooperation. In any case,

broad “strategic nuclear” engagement has stronger odds of success than narrow nuclear work. Talks should include nuclear weapons, conventional weapons, missile defense, and emerging technologies and domains that have or could have an impact on bilateral strategic stability.

Finally, to perform well, Washington should ramp up expertise in this area, both inside and outside the US government. It needs more experts who understand both China and strategic stability. This should receive its full attention.

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