



***SHOULD THE UNITED STATES  
ACKNOWLEDGE MUTUAL  
VULNERABILITY WITH CHINA?***

BY DAVID SANTORO

*David Santoro* ([david@pacforum.org](mailto:david@pacforum.org)) is President and CEO of the Pacific Forum. He is the editor of [\*US-China Nuclear Relations – The Impact of Strategic Triangles\*](#) (Lynne Rienner, May 2021). Follow him on Twitter [@DavidSantoro1](#).

The United States and China have never engaged in formal in-depth discussions about nuclear weapons. They have only discussed these issues at the track-2 and track-1.5 levels, i.e., unofficially. Still, during these [discussions](#), Chinese strategists always urged the United States to acknowledge that it is in a mutually vulnerable relationship with China.

The argument Chinese analysts make is that China has a much smaller nuclear arsenal than the United States' and its modernization program is not intended to attain parity, so a US "vulnerability acknowledgement" would alleviate concerns that Washington aims for "absolute security," i.e., the ability to negate Beijing's second-strike capability. They add that such an acknowledgement would create the conditions for stability and thus facilitate an official nuclear dialogue.

Several US analysts have [explained](#) that US-China mutual vulnerability is a "fact of life," despite the asymmetry of nuclear forces. The United States, however, has been reluctant to confirm it, fearing, in part, that doing so might lead Beijing to becoming more aggressive at the conventional and sub-conventional levels, notably in its neighborhood and against US allies.

**Should the United States acknowledge mutual vulnerability with China?**

The [study](#) "US China Mutual Vulnerability—Perspectives on the Debate" recently published in Pacific Forum's *Issues & Insights* series addresses that question. Its goal is not to give a yes-or-no answer but to provide a comprehensive examination of the issue to understand the pros and cons of the various policy options.

Relying on contributions by analysts, including former practitioners, from the United States, US allies, and China, the study explores lessons from the Cold War, i.e., if and how the US-Soviet (and then US-Russia) experience is instructive for US-China relations today. It also unpacks the benefits, costs, and risks of the United States acknowledging mutual vulnerability with China. Moreover, it looks at the requirements for the United States to make such an acknowledgement, what Washington should try to get in exchange, and, assuming a decision has been made to do so, what that acknowledgement should say and how it should be made. The study offers the perspectives of analysts from three key US regional allies—Japan, South Korea, and Australia—as well as China.

**Four findings stand out from the study:**

First, at the most general level, the study confirms that mutual vulnerability is a fundamental question in strategic nuclear relations, especially between major powers. It was the foundation upon which the United States and the Soviet Union organized and managed their strategic relations during the Cold War, and it is a key foundation for US-Russia strategic relations today. So, it is not surprising that mutual vulnerability features prominently in the US-China context today. This issue is here to stay.

Second, and paradoxically, the mutual vulnerability question is often misunderstood. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, a historical review reveals that acknowledging mutual vulnerability is far from straightforward and it is no guarantee of greater stability between its parties, even though it can

sometimes help set the stage for, and then facilitate, arms control agreements.

Third, the mutual vulnerability question is not settled in the US-China context, and it is unlikely to be settled soon. US analysts disagree about the value and utility of a US vulnerability acknowledgement. Analysts from allied countries see potential upsides if it strengthened US-China strategic stability, but they worry that the costs and risks might be prohibitive. Aside from “strategic” disagreements and concerns, the deterioration of US-China and US-Russia relations makes it unlikely that the United States will find the political will and capital to opt for such an acknowledgement. Opting for superiority or dominance over China, meanwhile, is unlikely as well because the costs would be astronomical (and the prospects for success bleak).

Fourth, and despite this conclusion, exploring the benefits, costs, and risks of opting for or rejecting mutual vulnerability with China is useful because it forces US analysts to reflect on the type of strategic nuclear relationship that Washington should pursue (and can have) with Beijing. Because it is so fundamental, even if analysts draw very different—and sometimes polar opposite—conclusions, asking the mutual vulnerability question compels the United States to identify, and distinguish between, the realm of the desirable and that of the possible to deal with nuclear China.

### **What insights can be teased out from these findings?**

The first is that states reluctantly acknowledge, let alone accept, that they are mutually vulnerable. Even when they do, they often try to escape that situation either because they worry about new technological developments that will checkmate them, or because they fear that the other party (or parties) might cheat on their commitments not to seek superiority or dominance over them. There is no reason to think that it would be different in the US-China context, especially given that the relationship extends far beyond the sole “strategic nuclear” dimension.

The second insight is that while it is unlikely to be settled any time soon, the mutual vulnerability question will haunt US-China strategic relations and probably gain increasing salience because China’s military power is rising fast. Washington, then, should be clear-eyed about its options: it can embrace mutual vulnerability; reject it and do everything it can to try and escape it; or maintain its current approach, i.e., decide not to decide. Each of these options presents important benefits, costs, and risks; none provides a silver bullet.

The third insight is that the rationale for choosing or rejecting mutual vulnerability is as important as the manner it is made and conveyed. Paying attention to the ways and means, then, is critical. Either way, expectations should be low in the short term: the road after choosing or rejecting mutual vulnerability will be the start of a long process, not the end. The United States should expect questions about why and how to maintain its chosen course of action to remain active.

The fourth insight is that balancing US policy between China and its allies will be challenging regardless of whether the United States chooses or rejects mutual vulnerability. In all circumstances, however, the United States should consult with its allies before deciding its course of action to ensure there is (sufficient) agreement. Doing so will help reduce anxieties and increase the odds that allied capitals will assist when and if they are needed to implement the decision.

The fifth and final insight is that the United States should not lose sight of the bigger picture. Because US-China strategic relations are evolving in an era of nuclear multipolarity, a decision to choose or reject mutual vulnerability will have knock-on effects. At the most general level, acknowledging mutual vulnerability would signal that there is a pathway to nuclear diplomacy, whereas rejecting it (even de facto) would suggest that the focus is more squarely on nuclear deterrence. Other states, notably Russia or North Korea, will notice and possibly adapt their policy and posture.

In a recent [speech](#) at the George Washington University, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken

called China “the most serious long-term challenge to the international order,” adding that it is “one of the most complex and consequential relationships of any that we have in the world today.” Dealing with the mutual vulnerability question, over nuclear weapons and beyond, is at the very center of this problem.

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