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**The U.S.-China Strategic Relationship;
Strategic Insights, v. 6, issue 9 (2005)**

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Strategic Insights, v.6, issue 9 (September 2005)

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The U.S.-China Strategic Relationship

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 9 (September 2005)

by [Michael May](#)

Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

What strategic roles have nuclear weapons historically served? What are the key determinants of deterrence? What is strategic stability and what factors enhance or undermine it? Will the existing international regimes and understandings remain stable despite the advent of additional nuclear powers? How might we expect the nuclear world order to evolve in the future?

These questions are not easy. Some answers to them have nevertheless arisen over the first sixty years of the nuclear age. In this article, I will examine these answers in the context of the U.S.-China strategic relationship. These questions center on nuclear weapons—but nuclear weapons do not fully define a strategic relationship, so I start by discussing briefly what a strategic relationship consists of.

Basis of the U.S.-China Strategic Relationship

The strategic relationship between two countries is the interplay of their powers and goals. It consists first of political and economic relations, which have the greatest ability to translate into power on a day-to-day basis. To the extent it relies on military capabilities, it relies mostly on conventional forces and factors affecting their potential deployment. Only lastly is it defined by nuclear capabilities, which experience has shown to be an unusual and limited instrument of national power, applicable to very few situations, albeit situations where disaster is a possible consequence.

Thus, the most important factors affecting the U.S.-China strategic relationship are, from the United States' side, its position at the top of the relative power hierarchy, and, from China's side, its turn away from the autarchic ideological system it had under Mao Zedong to its current broad-scale international engagement. The U.S. position enables it to pursue more effectively its long-standing strategic goals of preventing a hegemon from arising on the Eurasian continent and of controlling international air and sea-lanes. Beyond that, relative superiority has permitted the United States to expand its military presence, alliances and other arrangements widely over the past dozen years. It is likely that this expansion was the result of contingency rather than planning, but the resulting deployments and commitments remain.

China's turn has made it into an economic power with worldwide impact and in particular with impact on the American economy. It has brought into being a Chinese middle class that is forcing the government to evolve and it has allowed China to engage in useful diplomatic as well as economic relationships around the world. Any assessment of the military and nuclear aspects of the strategic relationship must take these basics into account.

Among the military aspects of the strategic relationship between the United States and China, perhaps the defining one is the circumstance that the boundary between them lies mainly in the water, rather than, for instance, down the center of Europe or Asia. That boundary is less difficult to manage than boundaries that run down the middle of contested continents because of China's avoidance of a naval challenge to the United States—such as Germany and Japan mounted so disastrously, and such as the Soviet Union mounted so expensively and with so little success.

While less tense than the Cold War boundary or pre-World War II boundaries, that boundary is not free of problems. I will return to those problems when discussing strategic stability. Here I note only the basics. The United States has the most modern and, in most engagements, the most powerful air, naval, and ground forces in Asia. These forces hold sway over air and water, controlling the “global commons” in a current formulation^[1] and perhaps the littoral, but they would fare poorly in a prolonged inland war. At the same time, unlike Europe during the Cold War, when the richer half of the continent was solidly on the United States' side, U.S. power in Asia has relied on a handful of bases in Japan and South Korea. The Global Defense Posture Review attempts to alleviate this problem in several ways, including moving U.S. forces to dispersed and more numerous locations and relying more on force projection from Guam or the United States. For the future, the current Pentagon Quadrennial Defense Review is envisaging a force structure better suited to control terrorism while maintaining control of the global commons, rather than suited to fight two land wars simultaneously.^[2]

Turning now to the nuclear aspect of the U.S.-China strategic relation, the principal factor is that China has declined to enter into a nuclear arms race with the United States, limiting itself to a minimal strategic nuclear force that does not pose a threat of surprise attack. China has 18 DF-5 capable of reaching the United States and 12 DF-4 capable of reaching targets in Russia and elsewhere in Asia but not the United States. All are liquid-fueled. None is capable of launch in less than a few hours. Those numbers have not substantially changed in decades. Programs to develop a solid-fueled ICBM and a nuclear submarine capable of launching ballistic missiles have been in development since the 1980s. They qualify as the slowest strategic programs in any nation since the nuclear age began. China also has some 50 to 100 medium and short-range nuclear-capable ballistic missiles.

Forecasts have historically overestimated future Chinese nuclear forces by large factors. The lower priority given nuclear and generally military investments is brought into relief when compared to the trillions of dollars invested by China in its civilian infrastructure during the same decades. We are not dealing here with a new arms race.^[3]

In theory, the ongoing U.S. ABM deployment could spur China to build up its nuclear forces. The pace of U.S. deployment, the continuing need to test during deployment, and the limited nature of the deployment tend to make the United States' system a minor threat to even the present, highly limited Chinese strategic forces. Nevertheless, as the United States' ABM system tests out of its growing pains and becomes operational, it is likely to be a factor for larger Chinese forces and for MIRVing those forces.

The foregoing considerations together define some basics of the U.S.-China strategic relationship in broad outline, and must inform a more detailed discussion of the role of nuclear weapons and of the stability of that relationship. Should any of these underlying factors change, everything else would change. However, there is no sign at present of changes in those basic factors over the next decade or two.^[4]

The Role of Nuclear Weapons

The main role that nuclear weapons have played in U.S. policy after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and in every other nuclear power's policy to date, has been that of a deterrent of last resort. Since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there have been enough talks, books and papers on what should be nuclear weapons policy to fill a good-sized library. In light of that continuing debate, but not always in accordance with its received wisdom, a set of facts on the ground has developed.

The first of those facts is that nuclear weapons, though effective deterrents of last resort, have otherwise been quite limited instruments of power. States increase their relative power mainly by increasing their ability to influence the actions of others. Nuclear weapons have mainly helped induce states to avoid actions that would prove utterly destructive should they be attempted even in the absence of nuclear weapons. Thus a U.S.-Soviet war or a Soviet-China war or a U.S.-China war would have been, and would be today, destructive to every goal those three countries might have, nuclear weapons or no. So would another India-Pakistan war or another war between Israel and any Arab state. Nuclear weapons reinforce that message, including so-called war-fighting weapons. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the exceptions.

Some parts of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review leaked in 2002 also seem like exceptions, although some present and former administration members do not agree with that interpretation.^[5] The posture review and subsequent administration statements do call for research on weapons that can only be used in a tactical war-fighting mode, such as the bunker busters (RNEPs). These weapons, if ever developed, could be used against some targets in North Korea and China. Because of their limited capabilities, they would not significantly alter the United States' deterrent posture regarding China, however.

Emphasis on deterrence does not mean that the United States or the former Soviet Union, renounced hopes of military victory, however pyrrhic, should deterrence have failed. War was not desired but defeat in any sense was desired even less. During the Cold War, weapons were procured and deployed on both sides so that, should war occur, the other side's capacity to wage that war would be destroyed insofar as possible. Both sides had, in fact, if not in rhetoric, first strike options—limited in effectiveness and unable to prevent wide-scale destruction but not militarily meaningless. The existence of those options would have been a destabilizing factor in crises serious enough to make either side think war was possible. That is not now the case with China and I hope it does not become the case.

The second fact that developed over the past sixty years is that the possession of nuclear weapons induced caution and communication. The main cost of nuclear forces is not money but the risk of catastrophe. To alleviate that risk, nuclear-armed powers to date have not been willing to push their adversary into a corner, though they have been willing to push their adversary to some degree. The balance required a nicety of judgment that may not always be available. The nuclear threat has at times forced communication between adversaries, and is indeed doing so now in the case of the United States and North Korea. The most effective means of U.S.-Soviet communication involved arms control, which signaled, not an intent to disarm, but an intent to co-exist.

The third element of nuclear policy in the nuclear age has been a search for security in universal international pacts and organizations. That search dates back at least to the Czar's attempt to agree on peace a hundred years ago this summer—in part prompted by the invention of the machine gun. Machine guns claimed more lives than nuclear weapons, though not enough to scare us into peace. Nuclear weapons may scare us into peace, as Winston Churchill predicted, but the balance of terror is fraught with dangers. Nuclear weapons policies have sought to alleviate that danger not only by deterrence and restraint and communication but also by international pacts and organizations.

These pacts and organizations have received relatively broad and steady support. But their effectiveness is in question now, for two reasons:

1. First, while the only nuclear weapons capable countries in the early years of the nuclear age were either members of the Western or Soviet blocs, or else as in the case of China, large enough to deter direct attack, now more insecure and alienated governments are nuclear weapons-capable.
2. Second, the United States in the past five years, for reasons good or bad, has lent only occasional support to international pacts and organizations aimed at nuclear security. As a result, the international effort is at a juncture where it must either get much better or much worse. I return to this point at the end of this article.

The elements of nuclear weapons policy I have noted above do not comprise all that has evolved in the past sixty years—but they are in my mind the most important facets of a history that is familiar to readers of this journal. Today, nuclear weapons policies continue to imply deterrence against major attack, to make for restraint and communication between adversaries, and to search for international norms and cooperation. The question is, will such policies continue to lead to stable relationships among nuclear-armed powers? I consider next the stability of the U.S.-China strategic relationship.

Strategic Stability

Stability in a relationship means not that the relationship is static, which it cannot be; but that when faced with change and the accidents of history, it tends to return to peace rather than degenerate into war. Stability is measured by the ability to deal with change and disorder without catastrophe. For instance, the strategic stability of the U.S.-Russia relationship was and is measured by the ability of both sides to deal with crises in the Middle East and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The strategic stability of the U.S.-China relationship is measured by the ability to deal with problems in North Korea, Taiwan and elsewhere.

Such stability has depended historically on several factors, of which I will note five. They are:

1. The relative status of forces;
2. Geography;
3. Alliances and other relationships;
4. Domestic perceptions of the relationship; and
5. Economic relationships, or lack thereof.

These are not listed in order of importance: their relative importance depends on circumstances. Let us see what those factors are in the current U.S.-China relationship and then risk an assessment of U.S.-China strategic stability.

Relative Status of Forces

As noted, China, unlike the Soviet Union, has not attempted to match the United States either in conventional or nuclear capability. On the conventional front, while China is modernizing its forces—which are in general decades behind those of the United States—it has not attempted such very expensive initiatives as a blue-water navy or a long-range air force or integrated projection forces to rival those of the United States. On the nuclear front, as noted above, it has deployed short and medium range forces that would have a bearing on any war in East Asia, but has continued to limit its intercontinental force to a dozen or so antiquated and vulnerable missiles.

These forces do exist however, and if not destroyed in the first hours of a war, would threaten the existence of half a dozen or more cities in the United States. More relevantly, they could readily destroy U.S. military assets in East Asia, should those assets be used against China. As with nuclear weapons during the Cold War, but to a much lesser extent, they reinforce the perception that a U.S.-China war would inflict an extraordinary cost on both countries in people, money, and future influence in the world—a cost that dwarfs any relative advantage anyone might think could be derived from such a war.

The United States, while significantly reducing the numbers of nuclear weapons, has also named China as a possible nuclear target in the nuclear posture review and has stated several times that military assets over the long term would be shifted from other theaters to East Asia because that is where a greater likelihood of conflict existed. Iraq has distracted from but not changed that judgment.

Could the vulnerability of the Chinese missiles that can reach the United States make for instability in a serious crisis? The crisis would have to be quite serious for the United States to contemplate an attack on these forces, with all its uncertainties and all the consequences that would ensue. Nevertheless, unlike the situation with the Soviet Union, a disarming attack on Chinese nuclear forces could be thought of as feasible. The Chinese may remedy that situation by improving the survivability of their forces or considering defenses. Those steps may in turn, given the domestic situations, worsen the stability of the relationship on counts other than technical.

On the whole and under most circumstances, however, the balance of forces makes for stability. The point at which the United States traditionally becomes seriously alarmed is when a potential hegemon arises on the Eurasian continent, or when its naval and other means of projecting power abroad is seriously challenged. China has not chosen to pose that kind of challenge. No doubt, some will continue to sound the alarm over China's increasing ability to counter the American and other forces deployed in its vicinity. But in itself, aside from its effect on domestic perceptions, taken up below, this modernization should not make for instability so long as the Taiwan situation can be managed.

Geography

I have noted that China has not and probably cannot successfully challenge the United States in the naval and air global commons, and that the United States has not and probably cannot successfully challenge China inland. Nevertheless, some geographically related problems do exist. Neither the United States nor China is self-sufficient in essential resources. It is sometimes said that the traditional rivalries for resources that has led to so much warfare have been lessened by globalization of trade, information, and communication. The effect of globalization on strategic stability is limited in my view. There is only limited trust in the proposition that adversaries will not misuse the global economy.

Neither the United States nor China, for instance, fully trusts that the global oil market will suffice to meet their needs. On the contrary, there is a continuing discussion in both the United States and China about the merits of a so-called strategic approach to the oil and gas question—by which is actually meant buying properties abroad and making exclusive marketing arrangements—versus a market-based approach. Both the United States and China are oil and gas importers and from an economic point of view their interests are similar: to maintain an open, flexible world market for petroleum products and investments. This view has limited political resonance. Economic reality, unfortunately, has had little to do with strategic stability. As a result, we cannot rule oil wars out—although they probably won't be nuclear. They will damage all participants, but their rationale will be that some participants will be more damaged than others. So far, rationality has held, but rationality is fragile in the marketplace of political ideas.

Alliances and Other Relationships

In this respect, the U.S.-China relationship is potentially less stable than the Cold War U.S.-Soviet relationship was. During the Cold War, U.S. alliances, despite occasional alarms, were founded on fundamental shared political and economic interests as well as on security. European countries had a greater incentive to maintain peace in Europe than the United States did perhaps, but had no incentive to deal with the Soviet Union in ways that would weaken the alliance. Japan and South Korea were even more faithful and financially supportive U.S. allies than the Europeans.

The Soviet alliances were based on Soviet force and resented by the people that were subjugated. They broke up as soon as the Soviet grip weakened. Only client states that had nowhere else to go, such as Cuba, North Korea, and Iraq, remained faithful—and the Soviet Union abandoned them. But the Soviet allies had little or no capability to affect the stability of the overall relationship, nor did Cuba after 1962. The Middle East remained and remains dangerous, but American and Soviet leaders were of one mind as to the necessity of limiting that danger.

In the U.S.-China case today, the situation is different. The major countries involved, North and South Korea, Japan, Russia, and to an increasing degree India, all have changing capabilities and agendas, and those agendas do not predictably align in the most important matters affecting strategic stability with the agendas of either the United States or China. Neither does Taiwan's agenda. Others in this dialogue will address the Taiwan situation in more depth. While the United States and China have shown their interest in managing that situation, at the same time, China and Taiwan have said that the status quo is unacceptable. Unfortunately, it is difficult to think of any attempt to change the status quo soon that would not make the situation worse for all participants.

North Korea may now have or soon will have the capability to hold at risk all of the major U.S. bases in East Asia with nuclear weapons mounted on missiles that are difficult or impossible to target successfully.^[6] Recent North Korean statements indicate their desire to acquire this capability.^[7] Whether the United States will in fact be deterred, and what North Korea would do if attacked, is not predictable. Communication between the two countries is poor and mistrust is high.

At this writing, the Six Power Talks are scheduled to resume. They may succeed. If they do not, the existence of a nuclear-armed North Korea could threaten the stability of U.S.-China strategic relations if the United States were to attack North Korea. The effect of the North Korean capabilities on Japanese and South Korean policies must be considered and it is also not easily predictable. There is no parallel to this degree of uncertainty and fluidity during the Cold War. The Greco-Turkish problem was comparatively peripheral so far as U.S. and Soviet interests were concerned.

India in the past has been peripheral to the U.S.-China relationship, but may be less so in the future. Both the United States and China have been making overtures to India, while India has been able and willing to chart an independent strategic course. Which way it will eventually go, and to what extent India's choice will affect the stability of the U.S.-China relationship, is an additional changing factor that is not predictable with assurance.

Pakistan in the past has been an important bone of contention between China and the United States. The twin dangers of nuclear exports from Pakistan and of Islamist take-over there have not ended. U.S. and Chinese policies on these matters are better aligned now than in the past, but it is unclear to me to what extent remaining differences exist and matter.

Finally, while the United States is likely to remain the dominant economic and military power in the next twenty years, it will not have the kind of ascendancy it has enjoyed. Barring surprises, the United States will probably continue to grow economically at perhaps half the rate at which the major developing Asian powers will grow. The overall strategic position of the United States vis-à-vis Asian powers is, as a result, bound to decline over the long term, from one of dominant or essential participant to one of first among equals. Harbingers of growing Asian independence from the United States have been here for some time in the economic sphere. This process does not threaten the stability of the U.S.-China relationship, or any other U.S. relationship, in any direct way. The threat to stability will arise if either the United States or any major Asian power fails to adjust to this change.

Domestic Perceptions in the United States and China

Domestic perceptions of the U.S.-China relationship in the United States are on the whole a negative factor for strategic stability. Even moderate to liberal domestic U.S. opinion views China as a future if not a present rival, and is on the whole suspicious of the Chinese form of government and intentions. The right-wing opinion makers who are now politically dominant in the United States are even more strongly anti-Chinese. Only a minority, admittedly influential, of better informed politicians, China scholars, business leaders, and economists think that strategic rivalry between the United States and China is not inevitable, and that the United States has more to gain from partnership with China than from rivalry with it. But people who hold those views are influential in business rather than political matters.

That being said, the situation is not uniformly dark. For one thing, neither U.S. producers nor U.S. consumers want Chinese imports to disappear. For another, there is no serious popular sentiment against the Chinese people. Finally, there is something of an East-West divide within the United States, with Pacific coast residents both more acquainted and less worried about China and Asia generally. Still, there is a long way to go and much spade work to be done before domestic U.S. opinion could be considered a stabilizing factor in the U.S.-China strategic relationship—and domestic perceptions, while they do not determine policy, set limits on it and can facilitate the growth of either a stable or an unstable relationship.

Economic Relationship

From an economic viewpoint, China and the United States have become significantly interdependent, an interdependence that also includes investors and managers throughout East Asia and suppliers of raw materials and component parts from all over the world. Some 80 percent of the value of Chinese exports to the United States is added in other countries and a majority of the exporting firms have non-Chinese partners. Any U.S. economic decline will affect China and its many suppliers and investors around the world negatively, not positively, and vice-versa. In marked contrast with the U.S.-Soviet situation during the Cold War, economic interdependence has developed between China and the U.S., this interdependence affects much of the rest of the world, and, with few exceptions, as either fares, so to some extent the other will fare.

However important and beneficial this interdependence may be from an economic point of view, it is not likely to be a significant factor for strategic stability. Famously, economists before World War I sounded clear warnings that Europe had become economically interdependent to an extent that war there would ruin Europe. The war was fought nevertheless, Europe was duly ruined, and the ensuing political consequences haunted Europe to the end of World War II. Other cases exist. Modern war has been an economic disaster.

Economic realities, including economic interdependence, play little role in whether a country goes to war or not. Economic myths certainly do and they usually affect strategic stability quite

negatively. This is another reason why domestic perceptions matter: they determine which myths are believed.

While economic interdependence probably does not help stabilize the strategic relationship, a breakdown in global trade and the ensuing economic setbacks to all countries would help destabilize it. The forces to limit global trade are strong in the United States. Should they prevail, the recession or depression that would likely follow would make it politically profitable to blame some external actor, and China is a large and well-known external economic actor.

Conclusion

What conclusion regarding the stability of the U.S.-China strategic relationship does all this lead to? There is no nuclear arms race and little in the way of a conventional arms race, albeit continuing Chinese success in limiting the effectiveness of American deployments close to its shores will look like an arms race to some. There is a relatively uncontested geopolitical boundary except for the flashpoint at Taiwan. Relationships with and among other states in Asia are changing and unpredictable, which is not a stabilizing factor. The politically dominant domestic perceptions at least in the United States, while certainly not in favor of war, generally view the relationship as a rivalry, again not a stabilizing factor. The joint U.S.-Chinese interest in maintaining a peaceful economic interdependence and open markets is unlikely to have much ameliorating or stabilizing effect on the politics of the situation, although a breakdown in this beneficial situation could worsen the perception problem in the United States.

Can we add up these disparate factors? States play a strategic game to maximize their relative power. They place security at the top of their priority list, being afraid, with good reason, that, if they do not, they won't survive. The resulting mutual insecurity has led to endemic wars. Wars make no sense economically among major powers, and have not for some time, but that has not prevented them. This should make us pessimistic.

Two factors have altered the conditions of the game, although the game remains. First, the three major strategic powers today, the United States, Russia, and China, are so large that it would be difficult if not impossible for another state to threaten their physical survival, except with nuclear weapons in sufficient quantity. Direct attack on any one of the three would probably be considered overreach rather than additions to power. Second, nuclear weapons make direct attack far more dangerous even for the militarily superior side. This was most observers' conclusion sixty years ago, and it remains the foundation stone of nuclear deterrence.

My tentative conclusion is that, given realistic leadership, stability should hold between the United States and China so long as four conditions are met:

1. China continues not to challenge the United States on the high seas.
2. The United States accepts that China, and indeed other Asian powers, will grow relative to the United States in relative influence and power.
3. The Taiwan situation can be managed.
4. Leaders in both countries do not turn their publics against the other.

The nuclear balance is notably absent. Nuclear weapons help deter war but the details of the balance are, in my opinion, not terribly important.

Stability does not mean, I emphasize again, that the search for advantage in relative military and other forms of power will end or even abate. It only means that it is not likely to lead to war among the participants.

The political leadership in both countries—rather than objective military, geopolitical, or economic factors—will determine the strategic stability of the relationship. There is nothing inevitable about U.S.-China conflict, much political science theory to the contrary notwithstanding. England and France, England and Germany, France and Germany were military rivals and are no longer. Neither geopolitical nor economic realities have changed among them, but domestic perceptions have. Whether and how domestic perceptions will change in the United States and China any time soon is questionable. What the leaders in both countries can and will want to do is also something I cannot predict. But it is with them and those who influence them that the future of the relationship lies.

International Regimes

The destructive power of nuclear weapons led states to attempt regulating the nuclear aspect of international rivalries by means of international regimes and understandings. The international order is famously anarchic and insecure to its participants. The search for relative power, which it induces, has been strewn with disastrous errors. Disastrous errors on the scale of nuclear devastation scare governments, for good reason, and so the search for workable arrangements to avoid that devastation has been more popular among them than previous searches for cooperative security.

Those attempts took the form of supply restrictions and security assurances of varying strength and effectiveness. They have been partially successful in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. Today, owing to the spread of technological and other progress, supply restrictions have become less effective in ways that we are all familiar with. As a result, countries have become nuclear weapons capable that are not only insecure, but have historically been made insecure in part by U.S. policy, such as North Korea. Thus, both the supply and demand pillars of nuclear restraint by international agreement have weakened or disappeared. Will international agreements and understandings be effective in the future as tools of international stability?

The nuclear non-proliferation regime in its present form, while still badly needed to preserve what has been gained in the past, is no longer adequate to deal with present and future challenges. The remedies proposed include a number of more stringent supply constraints, including constraints on facilities that could make nuclear weapons materials, tighter and better enforced export controls and more demanding accounting and inspection requirements.^[8] Negotiations are under way with Iran and North Korea that could lead to security guarantees to both countries, as well as other benefits, in return for their abandonment of nuclear weapons programs. Other more or less ambitious demand-side measures have been suggested. The question here is, how the success or failure of international agreements would affect strategic stability, in particular with respect to the U.S.-China relation.

My answer is, only marginally. Although important to provide means for collective action and to confer some degree of legitimacy when political objectives are agreed, internationally agreed non-proliferation measures could only marginally affect whether North Korea becomes a nuclear-armed state and, if so, whether other states acquire nuclear weapons. As discussed above, Japan and South Korea could react in various ways, but it is hard to see how their choice would depend in an important way on international agreements and institutions. Those agreements and institutions have been very helpful in the North Korea case, but only as means to carry out agreed policies, not as independent political forces. The international community does not have the clout to enforce pacts and understandings among states as powerful and wealthy as those in East Asia unless those states agree. As a result, the health and welfare of the nuclear agreements and institutions will probably not have much effect on the stability of the strategic relationship between the United States and China and indeed among any of the East Asian states involved.

There is a possible exception. Nuclear weapons are equalizers to some degree. A few are enough to make force projection extremely dangerous and costly. U.S. military policy, which emphasizes force projection, will be particularly hampered by the further spread of nuclear weapons. How U.S. military and in particular nuclear policy reacts to the spread of nuclear weapons is an open and important question. If nuclear weapons continue to be used as deterrent of last resort, stability should be maintained. If they are used otherwise, the floodgates to wider use could open.

Absent reckless action that I do not foresee, the major powers concerned should be able to deal with the consequences of nuclear spread as they have to date, without affecting strategic stability among them. Whether they will act in concert through international agreements like strengthened non-proliferation agreements, or via bilateral or trilateral agreements, is hard to predict. The latter has been the more common situation and has led to geographic divisions of responsibility reminiscent of the older spheres of influence. This is anathema in American political thought, but it may happen nonetheless.

At a level short of strategic stability, international agreements and institutions do affect states, even powerful states. A case in point is India, which needs to import more uranium for its existing and planned power reactors, and is having difficulty even continuing its traditional supply arrangements owing to the tightened NPG regulations,^[9] which in turn are due in part to U.S. efforts. Thus, if there is agreement among the states involved, healthy international institutions will play a very useful role, but they will continue to be a consequence rather than a leading influence on the necessary underlying political agreements in a major way.

To avoid instability, in the sense I have defined it, what may be feasible is more modest and still difficult. It is an agreed roadmap between the United States and China, in the case of East Asian states, and probably between the United States and Russia in the case of Iran—a roadmap that spells out pitfalls that both states would want to avoid and that provides alternative ways to get through crises for future decisions. It should be an ongoing exercise in which both the United States and China become vested. It should recognize the fact that the United States, China, and every other country will continue to struggle to maximize their relative power but that nuclear war serves no side's interests. It should also recognize the fact that, absent effective demand-side measures to effectively address state insecurities, nuclear weapons will continue to spread.

About the Author

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His research interests include nuclear weapons policy among the major powers; energy consumption in East Asia and its environmental and security implications; and the evolution of information technologies and its impact on national security. This paper was originally prepared for the *U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue* on August 1-3, 2005 in Honolulu, Hawaii, sponsored by the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC) and the Pacific Forum CSIS.

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5. Department of Defense, "[Nuclear Posture Review \[Excerpts\]: Submitted to Congress on 31 December 2001](#)," January 8, 2002, 16-18 in particular. For a critique, see Roger Speed and Michael May, "[Dangerous Doctrine](#)," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (March/April 2005), 38-49. For a counterargument, see Keith B. Payne, "[The Nuclear Posture Review: Setting the Record Straight](#)," *The Washington Quarterly* 28:3 (Summer 2005), 135-151.
6. A nuclear-armed North Korea, if it can fit its plutonium-based warheads into the relatively spacious No-Dong missile, a task that other nuclear weapons states solved forty years ago, puts at risk most or all of the major U.S. air and naval bases in East Asia.
7. See for instance General Li Chan Kok, as quoted by Nicholas Kristof, "[Behind Enemy Lines](#)," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2005.
8. President George W. Bush, "[Remarks by the President on Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation](#)," Fort Lesley J. McNair - National Defense University, Washington, D.C. February 12, 2004; Mohammed ElBaradei, "[A New Security Framework](#)," *The Economist* 16, October 2003; Michael May and Tom Isaacs, "[Stronger Measures Needed To Prevent Proliferation](#)," *Issues in Science and Technology* (Spring 2004) 61-69.
9. A. Gopalakrishnan, "[Indo-U.S. Cooperation: A Non-Starter?](#)" *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 2, 2005.