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[Arms Control Today](#) > [January/February 2009](#) > [Chinese-U.S. Strategic Affairs: Dangerous Dynamism](#) > Chinese-U.S. Strategic Affairs: Dangerous Dynamism

Chinese-U.S. Strategic Affairs: Dangerous Dynamism

[Christopher P. Twomey](#)

Many aspects of the Chinese-U.S. relationship are mutually beneficial: some \$400 billion in trade, bilateral military exchanges, and Beijing's increasingly constructive diplomatic role. There are other grounds for concern. Each side's militaries view the other as a potential adversary and increasingly make plans and structure their forces with that in mind.

On the conventional side, there are many important areas to consider, but the potential for nuclear rivalry raises monumental risks. This article assesses the dangers in the bilateral nuclear relationship, the potential for traditional arms control to address these challenges, the broadening of the "strategic" military sphere, and the issue of proliferation beyond the bilateral relationship.

Strategic relations are not at the center of Chinese-U.S. relations today. They do not deserve to be tomorrow. They are, however, rising appropriately in importance and must be managed proactively.

The Core Bilateral Strategic Relationship

China and the United States are not in a strategic weapons arms race. Nonetheless, their modernization and sizing decisions increasingly are framed with the other in mind. Nuclear weapons are at the core of this interlocking pattern of development. In particular, China is the only permanent member of the UN Security Council expanding its arsenal; it is also enhancing its arsenal. The basic facts of Chinese strategic modernization are well known, if the details remain frustratingly opaque. China is deploying road-mobile, solid-fueled missiles, giving it a heightened degree of security in its second-strike capability. It is beginning to deploy ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). It is researching a wide range of warhead and delivery systems technologies that will lead to increased accuracy and, more pointedly, increased penetration against ballistic missile defenses. The size of China's deliverable arsenal against the United States will undoubtedly increase beyond the few dozen that it possessed recently.^[1] The pace of growth thus far has been moderate, although China has only recently developed reliable, survivable delivery systems. The final endpoint remains mired in opacity and uncertainty, although several score of deliverable warheads seems likely for the near term. These developments on the strategic side are coupled with elements of conventional modernization that impinge on the strategic balance.^[2]

The relevant issue, however, is not simply an evaluation of the Chinese modernization program, but rather an evaluation of the interaction of that modernization with U.S. capabilities and interests. U.S. capabilities are also changing. Under the provisions of START and SORT, the United States has continued to engage in quantitative reductions of its operational nuclear arsenal. At the same, there is ongoing updating of warhead guidance and fusing systems. Ballistic missile defense systems of a variety of footprints are being deployed. The U.S. SSBN force now leans more toward the Pacific than the Atlantic, reversing the Cold War deployment. Guam's capacity to support heavy bombers and attack submarines has been enhanced. Furthermore, advances in U.S. conventional weaponry have been so substantial that they too promise strategic effects: prompt global strike holds out the promise of a U.S. weapon on target anywhere in the world in less than an hour and B-2s with highly accurate weapons can sustain strategic effects over a campaign.

What are the concerns posed by these two programs of dynamic strategic arsenals? Most centrally, the development of the strategic forces detailed above has increasingly assumed an interlocked form. The U.S. revolution in precision guided munitions was followed by an emphasis on mobility in the Chinese missile force. U.S. missile defense systems have clearly spurred an emphasis on countermeasures in China's ICBM force and quantitative buildups in its regional missile arsenals.^[3] Beijing's new submarine-based forces further enhance the security of China's second-strike capability in the face of a potential U.S. strike but are likely to lead to increased attention to anti-submarine warfare in the United States. China's recent anti-satellite test provoked a U.S. demonstration of similar capabilities. Such reciprocal responses have the potential to move toward a tightly coupled arms race and certainly have already worsened threat perceptions on each side. The potential for conflict is not simply that of inadvertent escalation; there are conflicts of interests between the two. Heightening threat perceptions in that context greatly complicates diplomacy.

Further, the dangers of inadvertent escalation have been exacerbated by some of these moves. Chinese SSBN deployment will stress an untested command-and-control system. Similar dangers in the Cold War were mitigated, although not entirely overcome, over a period of decades of development of personnel and technical solutions. China appears to have few such controls in place today. U.S. deployment of highly accurate nuclear warheads is consistent with a first-strike doctrine and seems sized for threats larger than "rogue" nations. These too would undermine stability in an intense crisis.

Prospects for Improvement?

There is no simple solution for this set of problems. The differences in national interests held by Beijing and Washington are not likely to be materially affected by Barack Obama's inauguration as president. That said, the unilateralist and anti-institutional approach to arms control that characterized the Bush administration is likely to wane. The Chinese are not currently interested in discussing traditional bilateral arms control agreements for two reasons: doing so suggests an equating of the contemporary Chinese-U.S. relationship with the Cold War standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States and the U.S. arsenal remains much larger than China's. Yet, it is wrong to expect such views to hold in perpetuity. Beijing's emphasis on ambiguity about its arsenal, which is incompatible with serious negotiations over arms control, is not a cultural predisposition toward "strategic deception" any more than was the Soviet Union's early Cold War emphasis on secrecy. Instead, these are rational strategies when nuclear arsenals are small. Intrusive verification eventually became conceivable even to hard-line Soviet leaders. Certainly, economic exhaustion contributed to that change, but so too did fundamental changes in Soviet threat perceptions.^[4] Although the former seems unlikely in China in the near term, the latter is something that might be fomented.

The further development of those U.S.-Russian arms control discussions will have critical implications for China. If follow-on agreements to START and SORT include further quantitative reductions, as is likely, they will again move the U.S. arsenal toward an important rhetorical threshold that China has used to justify its own stance on bilateral arms control. This poses risks and opportunities. The opportunity to bring the other nuclear powers to the table, even informally, as the Russian-U.S. discussions progress would be a useful vehicle to elicit China's interest in serious moves in this area. The risk of enticing China to engage in an arsenal buildup to U.S. levels is not one that should be overstated. At the geostrategic level as well as in operational doctrine as it is understood, China's approach to nuclear strategy has emphasized elements that would be inconsistent with a large buildup: counter-value rather than counter-force or war-fighting doctrines, a historical tolerance of much lower arsenal sizes given a perception of the limited utility of nuclear forces, and, explicitly, avoidance of a strategic arms race. The United States can actively reduce these risks further.

Deepening engagement on nuclear and nuclear-related strategic issues would be constructive in this regard. Bilateral confidence measures between China and the United States could be discussed, particularly in the area of declaratory policy. The Chinese have often asked why the United States is unwilling to offer a no-first-use pledge. A blanket no-first-use pledge might undermine U.S. credibility in other regions. Yet, a pledge narrowly confined to the Chinese-U.S. arena would seem to have fewer costs. What benefits would the United States garner from such a pledge from Beijing? Similarly, would Beijing view positively a definitive statement that the United States accepts the existence of a Chinese secure second-strike capability? For what might the United States hope in return? These questions remain unanswered.

Other steps could move beyond diplomacy alone. Detailed discussions with China of U.S. warhead modernization plans

that take Chinese concerns seriously could be constructive. Similarly, a reinvigorated U.S. effort to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) would hint at a broader return to the commitment toward multilateral arms control that characterized U.S. foreign policy under both parties throughout the Cold War. Such reinvigoration of the broader regime is critical to making progress on narrowly bilateral issues as that regime provides a global context in which Beijing views the bilateral relationship. Finally, are there aspects of the U.S. modernization program, for instance, highly accurate guidance systems on Trident II warheads, that Washington and Omaha might be willing to forgo in exchange for tacit restraint in other areas from Beijing? Precisely these sorts of trades were at the heart of important arms control agreements between the Soviets and the United States in the Cold War. Although such steps are premature today, understanding the possible parameters of such exchanges is useful for laying the groundwork for future discussions.

Certainly, some of the onus for stagnation of dialogue on such issue rests with China. Direct U.S. interaction with Chinese nuclear strategists is extremely rare, and the Bush administration is to be commended for prioritizing an official dialogue on this topic with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Second Artillery (its nuclear force) in particular.^[5] Still, even scheduling meetings has been fraught with difficulties. Most recently, Beijing used a Taiwan arms sales package as a pretext to derail official discussion of these topics. The Obama administration should advocate rapid resumption of these important confidence-building measures. At the same time, it is important for the United States to discuss Chinese concerns about U.S. plans openly and honestly. The increasing coupling of strategic modernization and development suggests this issue needs added attention from both sides.^[6]

Broadened Meaning of "Strategic"

Space and missile defense are increasingly intertwined with traditional nuclear issues. U.S. missile defense certainly complicates the calculus of potential adversaries, but it also greatly complicates traditional approaches to reducing dangers of strategic weapons. International relations theory has trouble putting nuclear weapons and missile defense systems into an "offensive-defensive" dichotomy because most theorizing about nuclear weapons took place in the era of mutually assured destruction when the utility of nuclear weapons for anything other than retaliation made little sense. The space realm is clear in that area. Anti-satellite weapons are clearly offense dominant today: first-strike attacks against satellites confer great advantages, and defenses are costly and not currently deployed. This emphasizes the dangers of spirals and security dilemmas. Other issues are less straightforward. The dual-use potential for launch capabilities complicates verification of any potential arms control agreement. More broadly, communications and data collection satellites are directly connected to economic markets in ways most military technologies are not.

Beyond applying these general concerns to its own situation, Beijing sees a fairly integrated package that seems designed to undermine the security of its second-strike capability. Improved accuracy and capacity for hitting silos call into question China's older missiles. Advanced intelligence assets would be useful for tracking China's nascent mobile missile force. Accurate conventional weapons, global strike or otherwise, could reduce the scale of damage imposed on Chinese society writ large in some cases. Even a moderate-scale missile defense system—the Pentagon is planning on 50 interceptors by 2012—provides important capabilities against any surviving Chinese missiles.

The incoming Obama administration can do much to improve on existing policy. The Russians have received extensive briefings on U.S. missile defense systems and were offered the right to observe control rooms in eastern European missile defense facilities. What steps along that range might be appropriate for China? In the area of space policy, numerous small steps can be taken in terms of codes of conduct, launch notifications, noninterference pledges, and other issues.^[7] Again, even discussing these issues has been quite simply off the table under the Bush administration. Chinese proposals on "Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space" require much further development before they can be adequately evaluated. Several issues are critical from the U.S. perspective: the status of various missile defense technologies under that proposal, dual-use technologies, and the nature of verification in general. Still, more active U.S. diplomacy on this issue, whether at the Conference on Disarmament or in other fora, would be beneficial. An administration less wedded to complete freedom of action on missile defense technologies and scale should be willing at least to begin these discussions.

Nonproliferation: Global Regimes and Specific Cases

A global approach to nonproliferation will fail without China's active support. Bush administration policies have eroded the current system, already under stress due to globalization and the end of the Cold War. The U.S.-Indian deal on nuclear energy was highly salient for China because of its rivalry with India and friendship with Pakistan. In the North Korean case, inspections may well move forward on a bilateral basis rather than through existing global fora.

The United States can take steps to begin to repair this damage, regaining the initiative on the global nonproliferation regime. Quick ratification of the CTBT will send a positive signal. Reinvigorated diplomacy on a treaty cutting off the production of fissile material for weapons might do so as well. On that issue, however, China's objections need to be taken seriously. China's stockpile of fissile material is a miniscule fraction of that of the United States. Freezing that ratio in place in perpetuity is something China would only concede in response to other inducements. These should be discussed frankly.

Beyond these small-scale steps and more fundamentally, a new nonproliferation architecture is needed. China must be integrally involved in its design. In the wake of the U.S.-Indian nuclear deal and with failures to stop proliferation in North Korea, it is unclear if the current hodgepodge of overlapping institutions (nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, International Atomic Energy Agency, Nuclear Suppliers Group [NSG], etc.) will continue to form the basis of the global approach to containing proliferation. As new global approaches are developed, it should be recognized that China's participation in the World Trade Organization and in the recent G-20 meetings on the financial crisis has generally been responsible, if not entirely to U.S. liking. In the current global context, the United States cannot dictate the design of that architecture; Beijing, as well as others, must play a constitutive role.

It should be noted that Beijing's behavior in several specific cases has improved in this regard. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has hailed Chinese leadership of the six-party talks. Chinese policy on Iran hardened notably in 2006, supporting UN Security Council Resolution 1696. In both cases, U.S. preferences would have been for still-firmer action, but the progress in Chinese policy is clearly discernable. On the other hand, China's recent apparent regression in deciding to sell additional nuclear reactors to Pakistan seemed to flout common sense and its previous commitments to the NSG. Again, however, the U.S. role in undermining the framework within which the NSG exists by pursuing the India deal is notable.

Creating the same degree of engagement and, indeed, internalization of goals that China has on North Korea in the other two cases-Iran and Pakistan-will be elusive. Iran serves important energy security needs for Beijing,^[8] and Pakistan's role in traditional Chinese security concerns on its flank is substantial. Still, a U.S. nonproliferation policy that discriminates based on regime type rather than nonproliferation behavior is unlikely to resonate in authoritarian China. A creation of international institutions that can judge proliferation behavior impartially would be more successful. Chinese analysts voice increasing concern that proliferation is a problem for China rather than merely a Western concern.

Tailored...Diplomacy

It is critical that policymakers recognize the rapidly changing nature of the way foreign policy is practiced in China today. Although deep-seated strategic cultural norms are of limited utility in understanding China's policy today, the interplay between civilian and military leaders and the proliferation of inputs available to policymakers is. On arms control issues, the tensions between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the PLA strain the policy formulation process. Understanding Chinese space policy requires an immersion in the economic actors that shape PLA policy. Proliferation issues bring a different set of economic actors into the process. Even asking whether there is civilian control in any of these policy areas grossly oversimplifies. China is in the midst of substantial political change, a pluralization of actors, and a new set of political responses to a range of domestic challenges. This process complicates any interaction with China on security issues as well.

These domestic changes complicate the dynamism in the strategic arena itself. The interaction of the U.S. shift in approach toward strategic weapons coupled with modernization of China's arsenal has much potential to destabilize the relationship. Further tightening of the interlocking moves by each side has the potential to lead to an arms race, at least in qualitative terms. This would move the strategic issue to the foreground of the relationship. Given that there are pre-existing contentious issues to be dampened and more positive aspects to the relationship to be managed, this outcome

would be inflammatory. Strategic nuclear competition between the two nations would be extraordinarily costly. Taking prudent steps to keep this issue out of the center of the relationship today is valuable. The policies suggested above would be important first steps in dampening dangerous dynamics in Chinese-U.S. strategic relations.

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ENDNOTES

1. For a comprehensive discussion of what is known about the Chinese nuclear arsenal in open-source literature, see Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, "U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2008," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (March/April 2008), pp. 50-53.
2. For instance, a rapidly increasing conventional ballistic missile threat against Taiwan and targets further afield in Japan and Guam, a range of anti-satellite technologies, cyber warfare, and certain elements of China's "anti-access" strategies aimed at holding off U.S. carrier battle groups.
3. Chinese interlocutors speak about the role of penetration aides in this context. See Christopher P. Twomey and Kali Shelor, "U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue, 3rd Annual Meeting, Conference Report," 2008.
4. Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1994); Matthew Evangelista, "Turning Points in Arms Control," in *Ending the Cold War: Interpretations, Causation, and the Study of International Relations*, ed. Richard K. Herrmann and Richard Ned Lebow (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
5. The author would like to thank Brad Roberts for highlighting the importance of this point.
6. For a useful discussion of some possibilities in this regard, see Brad Roberts, "Arms Control and Sino-U.S. Strategic Stability," in *Perspectives on Sino-American Strategic Nuclear Issues*, ed. Christopher P. Twomey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
7. For detailed discussions of these and others, see James Clay Moltz, *The Politics of Space Security: Strategic Restraint and the Pursuit of National Interests* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
8. For a masterful treatment of the history of the Chinese-Iranian relationship, see John W. Garver, *China and Iran : Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

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