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Reducing Misperception and Increasing Mutual Trust in Sino-American Strategic Affairs

A Conference Report from the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue, Phase II

Conference organized by the Center for Contemporary Conflict, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School and the Pacific Forum of the Center for Strategic and International Studies for the Advanced Systems and Concepts Office of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency

Honolulu, Hawaii
November 5-7, 2006

by Dr. Christopher P. Twomey and Ms. Kali Shelor

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Introduction

The *U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue* was held in Honolulu, Hawaii, on November 5-7, 2006, in collaboration with Pacific Forum of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and with support from the Advanced Systems and Concepts Office of Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA/ASCO), U.S. Department of Defense. This was the second meeting of the *U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue*—an annual track-two conference that brings together Chinese and American officials and analysts to discuss nuclear strategy, doctrine, and crisis management. The American participants were primarily academics, although several had experience in international security issues while working for the U.S. government and U.S. military. The Chinese participants were a mix of academics, think tank analysts, and military officers. (Please see the list of conference participants below.) The conference was held under the explicit understanding that all participants were speaking unofficially, as observers and analysts of their government's policy, not representatives of it.

DTRA/ASCO has funded the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue for its first two years and is in the process of continuing that into a third year. As the leading agency responsible for addressing threats from weapons of mass destruction (WMD), DTRA/ASCO desires generally "to enhance American situational awareness of other countries' nuclear strategies and capabilities, reduce the prospects for proliferation worldwide and in Asia in particular, and more broadly enhance American deterrence during a time of transformation. Particular interests guiding DTRA/ASCO's leadership of this project have included identifying important misperceptions, misunderstandings, and key divergences in national interests, with a goal of reducing these over the long term."

Thus, the goal of this series of annual meetings has been to identify important misperceptions regarding each side's nuclear strategy and doctrine and highlight potential areas of cooperation or confidence building measures that might reduce such dangers in Sino-American relations.

Beyond that, the conference aimed to deepen each side's understanding of the way the other views nuclear weapons, the domestic debates that shape those views, and the degree to which there is change in strategy, doctrine, and force posture. These are sensitive issues, and at times it is useful for both sides to have unofficial opportunities to learn about the other. These meetings can serve as a useful supplement to official contacts, in a similar manner to academic and other, broader fora.

Both of the first two annual sessions focused their discussions on general perceptions of the utility of nuclear weapons, the nature of current nuclear strategy and operational concepts of each side, regional issues pertaining to nuclear weapons issues, and prospects for cooperation with regard to specific policy areas. These are likely areas of enduring interest between the two countries, and they will remain on the agenda of the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue in future years.

Rather than providing a panel-by-panel summary of the discussion, the remainder of this report surveys the broad themes considered in the sessions. In keeping with the ground rules of the conference, particular participant statements are not quoted, nor are individual views summarized. Rather, an overall sense of the themes of the discussion is provided here. The first section will address American policy and beliefs, as manifested in conference discussions. The second section will reverse that to look at what was learned about Chinese policy and beliefs. Finally, a discussion regarding the conference's theme of crisis management will be summarized and the implications regarding future directions for similar work will be surveyed.



The Dialogue kicked off with opening remarks by Admiral Dennis Blair, ret., former Commander, Pacific Command.

U.S. Nuclear Policy in Flux?

One Chinese participant provided a useful summary of the primary context framing Chinese analysis when he characterized the overall Sino-American nuclear relationship as one of “unbalanced mutual deterrence.” Participants from both China and the United States argued that the United States had shifted from conceiving of nuclear weapons primarily as a deterrent facing the Soviet Union to one capable of addressing smaller threats and characterized this as the most important recent change in U.S. policy. Participants from both countries also tended to emphasize that the United States was planning to address such smaller threats through both dissuasion and—if necessary—military defeat. Chinese participants understood that proliferation of WMD was the central danger that these smaller states pose to the United States (while there was some sense that this was important to China, that was markedly less the case than for the United States). Central to some Chinese concerns regarding American nuclear strategy was a fear that the United States might see China as one of the rogue states who poses such a danger.

One of the most important—and misguided—views expressed in the session pertained to current American doctrine. Paralleling their views on the broadest levels of American strategy toward nuclear weapons, some Chinese argued that U.S. doctrine is too offensive. Several factors were offered to support this. First, it is said to incorporate elements of “nuclear warfighting.” Second, the emphasis on “preemption” in a range of U.S. policy documents also supports this contention of an offensive doctrine for Chinese analysts. Finally, the United States’ reluctance to declare its own NFU policy is taken by Chinese participants as confirmation of an American *first use* policy. Forceful rebuttals to this argument were offered by various U.S. participants of each of these points, and further discussion on this issue is likely worthwhile.

Whither the American Nuclear Threshold?

One of the most persistent debates between the Chinese and the American participants pertains to the argument that recent changes in American doctrine have lowered the threshold for nuclear use. Chinese participants note the potential nuclear role in combating any WMD, and highlight that this is a shift from the emphasis during the Cold War on nuclear weapons alone. Chinese participants also note the broad usage of the term “preemption” to include preventing developments that may not be imminent. This too suggests a lowering of the nuclear threshold for Beijing. American participants repeatedly contested these assertions, as they typically do in other track 1.5 and track 2 sessions. Most Americans characterize the current thinking regarding nuclear weapons among policymakers to be one of neglect. Nuclear issues are relegated to a second tier of security issues. New, non-nuclear options are being developed to allow the United States to have alternatives available short of nuclear weapons. These points were much debated at the conference.

One possible area of increasing convergence did seem apparent: surrounding the issue of U.S. nuclear weapons development programs. In past track 1.5 and track 2 sessions, examples like the unfunded Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator were raised by Chinese participants to exemplify an active, dynamic, and increased American reliance on nuclear weapons. Participants from the United States often highlighted the lack of budgetary resources and the lack of congressional interest in such development more generally. In general, this point received much less emphasis by the Chinese side in this session than in other, similar fora.

Counter-Military Intimidation Policy or Deterrence?

Pervading all of these discussions is an important terminological difficulty. The Chinese term usually used to describe their own deterrence policy means literally “to counter military intimidation.” The closest analogue to the term deterrence itself contains a strong element of coercion or compellence.^[1] While this linguistic issue is well understood by American Sinologists and some Chinese specialists in U.S. security policy, it still colors the language used between the two sides in ways that have a subtle negative effect on deliberation. Any discussion of the

positive aspects of a situation characterized by secure second strike potential for both sides is undermined by this issue of phrasing for the Chinese participants.

It is important to remember that this linguistic issue will continue to shape the way Chinese interlocutors (and Chinese policymakers and military leaders more generally) interpret statements that Americans may make intending to convey relatively benign intentions (i.e., “we view our nuclear weapons as having deterrence value only” has something of an offensive edge in Chinese.) Thus, aspects of the strategic nuclear relationship that should be viewed as relatively stabilizing from both sides are not always viewed as such.

China’s Continued Declaratory “No First Use” Policy

Turning to the discussions of Chinese policy, one topic that received much discussion was China’s “no first use” policy (hereafter NFU). This was cited repeatedly as the core of China’s strategy, and its persistence and immutability was often asserted. In general, the Chinese participants expressed a view on the utility of nuclear weapons that would have resonated with academic debates in the United States in the 1970s and 80s: nuclear weapons are only useful as a retaliatory weapon of last resort (and through the deterrence that comes from the threat of such final usage). While this was a general perception expressed by most of the Chinese participants, at times this view was more explicitly linked to China’s position in the nuclear balance. Thus, one Chinese participant made brief reference to one important justification for the NFU: expediency. This participant noted that given China’s small arsenal, there were few options for alternate policies.

There was some discussion of debates regarding Chinese policy within the corridors of power in Beijing. The Chinese side characterized their debate regarding nuclear strategy as one that is focused on maintaining the credibility of their deterrence. For the most part, there was open acknowledgement that the NFU has been debated in recent times in China, in the context of questions regarding the credibility of China’s deterrent. One Chinese participant said the debate on NFU only occurred among academics while others suggested they also extended to the “official academic community” in the armed forces and government.

Chinese Doctrine and Force Posture

The Chinese side did discuss a number of elements surrounding their nuclear doctrine and force posture. Much of this reiterated statements made at past track 1.5 and track 2 meetings, but often slightly more explicit formulations were used. The summary is separated here to discuss first Chinese doctrine (or as it was referred to in the conference, the nuclear operational concepts) and later specifics about ongoing Chinese force modernization efforts.

Chinese participants suggested that Chinese nuclear operational concepts stemmed from the overall policy of the NFU. They emphasized that China planned to absorb a first strike before contemplating its counterattack. This, thus, emphasized the importance of the survivability of the Chinese arsenal. Some broad allusions to a prioritization of subsequent retaliation were made, referring to consideration of military and/or political targets. While reiterating that the core NFU aspect guiding Chinese doctrine would not change, Chinese participants confirmed that the Second Artillery was in the midst of writing its nuclear doctrine. It was stated that there would be a publicly published version of this, but that an exact timeframe as to when this would be available was unknown.

Several discussants emphasized that the PLA does not feel any particular urgency regarding the pace of retaliation. Participants argued that China neither had nor needed a launch-on-warning capability, and described the deployment status of the Chinese arsenal as very relaxed. Relatedly, it was suggested that the already low levels of readiness of Chinese forces had been reduced

through the declaratory de-targeting policy taken with the United States, and the positive effect of this in reducing the prospect for unintentional escalation was emphasized.

In response to probing by one of the American analysts, the Chinese participants flatly asserted that conventional offensive doctrines (i.e., counterpoint attacks, etc.) are not relevant to Chinese nuclear doctrine. One Chinese noted that various terms implying what Americans would call “war fighting doctrines”^[2] such as “counterstrikes,” “demonstrating resolve,” and “maintaining control of the situation,” that show up in Chinese military writings all refer to aspects of conventional military strategy and do not depend on nuclear weapons to be effective. Other Chinese participants concurred, itemizing arguments for each of these concepts being restricted to the conventional (or political) realm. Relatedly, and repeatedly, they argued that China understands the “ladder of escalation” to apply only to the conventional sphere and not the nuclear arena. Rather, China views nuclear weapons as an all or nothing proposition and nuclear war as something that is not “controllable.”

In terms of the Chinese reaction to American policy, several Chinese participants expressed a reluctance to be drawn into high intensity nuclear competition with the United States, since they see that as having contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Comments along these lines were made with particular reference to NMD. In other comments, Chinese participants would refer to a substantial quantitative increase by the PLA as being too costly, again with reference to the Soviet experience.

One final element of modernization was also mentioned: maintaining China’s nuclear warheads. A Chinese panelist stated that Chinese technical experts had an active weapons maintenance and management system, and suggested that they too had means to assess the viability of their warheads without nuclear testing. This would seem to suggest that Chinese concerns regarding ongoing U.S. efforts in the same regard—i.e., sub-critical testing, computer modeling, and potentially even reliable replacement warhead (RRW)—should be viewed as less threatening. This is likely an issue worth discussing in subsequent track 1.5 and 2 meetings.



Prof. Christopher Twomey takes notes during Rear Admiral Yang Yi's presentation at the conference.

Crisis Management

One of the goals of the conference was to begin a discussion about crisis management between the two sides, particularly by using several academics to highlight other cases. Two American presentations stressed the dangers of inadvertent crisis escalation in historic cold war cases and in recent South Asian cases. A Chinese prepared presentation commented on Chinese lessons from the past fifty years. A number of interesting perspectives were raised by all participants in the ensuing discussion.

Common Themes from the Crisis Management Literature Were Reiterated

Throughout the discussion, it was clear that the important roles for oral and written communications, signaling through actions, and the interpretation of both of these were all widely understood. These lessons are similarly understood on the United States and Chinese side at a general level (although there was much disagreement about each side's use of signaling in early Cold War cases). One Chinese participant noted that one of the reasons the EP-3 incident was so problematic was because there was not a straightforward line of communication for the United States to use. (Indeed, it appears on the basis of outside analysis, that the same applied *within* China in that instance, with poor communication between Beijing and Hainan). Participants from both sides highlighted the importance of personal backchannels between senior leaders of the two sides in past crises and the potential utility of them in the future.

Further, there was a recognition by both sides that avoiding time pressure was crucial for successful crisis management. A Chinese participant noted approvingly that the EP-3 incident was resolved after initial emotions had cooled and each side was able to express more flexibility. Indeed, other participants also noted the desirability of avoiding short fuse situations (however much beyond one's control this issue might be). An American participant emphasized the

difficulties in controlling the pace of crises, and the importance, therefore, of maintaining—or creating, in the Sino-American case—open links of communication. Finally, several Chinese participants, in different ways, stressed the importance of both the balance of power and the balance of national interests in shaping crises. These were initially raised in the context of historic crises, but were also extrapolated to the Taiwan case.



Mr. Mike Urena and Prof. Chu Shulong chat during a break about the utility of the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue.

Other, More Unique, Concerns also Raised

However, several themes emerged from the discussion that moved well beyond generic or academic level discussions of crisis management.

First, the role of the media and the Internet in constraining government actions was emphasized by various Chinese participants. While American participants acknowledged the issue, rarely did they give it as much emphasis as the Chinese side appeared to perhaps because it is thoroughly incorporated into American understandings of the nature of international diplomacy. Clearly, the media in China today remain closely controlled, but also just as obviously, the degree of control has declined markedly in the past 30 years. Many press outlets are responsible for their own profits, and this does drive both the substance and tone of their commentary, at least at the margins. It is very interesting to discuss the ways in which press issues constrain, or are perceived to constrain, each side. For instance, one Chinese participant worried about the ability of the government to conduct private negotiations in the context of a modern media. Another noted the tendency of the media to inflate crises for their own gain, others on both sides noted that extrapolating from the past is challenging in the context of substantial technologic change.

Second, at several points, the Chinese participants raised concerns about the difficulty in managing crises in China due to the lack of a strongly unitary or centralized leadership in Beijing. There are no simple analogues to a National Security Council beholden to the President. The

most powerful formal body in China, the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), is a group of anywhere from 5-10 persons in size and is typically understood to make decisions by consensus. One Chinese participant argued that the Chinese leadership (other than President Hu Jintao) cannot communicate directly with the U.S. President in a crisis until there has been a meeting of the PBSC. Relatedly, another pointed out there is no direct analogue for the PACOM commander, nor even for the Secretary of Defense. Regional commanders in China lack as much autonomy as their counterparts do in the United States and the Chinese Ministry of Defense lacks substantial staffing and power at this point in time. Others echoed this general point about the high degree of centralization making it hard to empower lower levels of the bureaucracy.

These issues suggest that, in general, China will not be able to nimbly react in times of crisis. Policy sclerosis is rarely thought of in the academic literature as being conducive to crisis management. Further, as expressed by one Chinese, this is not a problem that is likely to be solved in the near future; he stated that he worried about the PRC's ability to develop the requisite institutions for adequate crisis management.^[3]

Additionally, there was some discussion regarding the role of cultural differences in shaping crisis behavior. One participant included a significant discussion of this in his paper, and several civilian analysts from the Chinese side supported the point. The Chinese emphasized the traditional view of American culture as individually focused, thus valuing people's lives, whereas Chinese culture is more collectivist and emphasizes issues of face. It was also noted that cultures do change over time, making this problem even more challenging.

Post 9/11 and Post-Cold War Threats and Interests

The conference also raised several issues pertaining to proliferation and terrorism as national interests of China that are worth summarizing as they represent relatively recent shifts in Chinese foreign policy thinking. A few comments on Taiwan are also related here, given their intrinsic importance rather than any particular innovation that they represent.

Proliferation in Asia: North Korea and Beyond?

While the North Korea issue was not formally on the agenda, unsurprisingly, it was raised several times. One Chinese participant painted a stark range of options facing China, noting that either regime collapse or continuation down the nuclear road is detrimental toward Chinese interests. A number of American and Chinese participants expressed deep pessimism about the North Korea issue in general

Beyond this specific topic, broader regional issues were touched upon briefly. There was something of a divide on the dangers posed by regional proliferation spirals. On the one hand was the view that the United States would be able to restrain any pressure towards proliferation felt by Japan and any other regional actors. Much more pessimistic onlookers noted the ongoing debates within Japan regarding the permissibility of nuclear weapons and argued that technical capabilities would not be an impediment for Tokyo.

For the United States, clearly terrorism related issues shape national perceptions in a very fundamental way. The Chinese, too, several times mentioned their concerns about terrorism. It was often raised as a general threat perception, generally with regards to the Xinjiang region and the East Turkistan separatist "movement" and related threats in Central Asia. However, the topic was also raised in the nuclear context as a threat the Chinese were endeavoring to defend their nuclear weapons from (i.e., nuclear weapons security). It is suggestive of the beginnings of convergence of Sino-American threat perceptions on this issue, and may lead to added potential for cooperation on non-proliferation fronts, or on issues of combating terrorism internationally more generally.

Taiwan was mentioned several times, despite it not formally being on the agenda. While an American emphasized the view held in the United States of a degree of confidence that the balance of conventional forces favored Washington, at least one Chinese questioned that assessment. Another downplayed the likelihood of any conflict there, based on relatively good relations between the United States and China both in general and on this issue (e.g., the December 2004 private warnings to Chen Shui-bian from U.S. emissaries, the Dec. 2003 public warning by President Bush, etc.). One Chinese participant also argued that the chance of inadvertent escalation in the Strait was low given that it was not in either side's interest to have a conflict. Several Americans responded regarding the lessons of history, not least the Cuban Missile Crisis, that argued such confidence was dangerous.



Ms. Bonnie Glaser and Mr. Ralph Cossa listen to remarks by Dr. Michael Pillsbury (center).

Potential Areas for Progress in Sino-American Strategic Relations

Several narrow areas for potential future consideration that might directly enhance security for the United States, or that might indirectly build confidence thus supporting stability more generally, emerged from the discussions:

Nuclear Weapons Safety and Security

First, there was a nascent discussion on nuclear weapons safety and security. However, it seems that future Track 1.5 and 2 sessions can probe further to see if there is room to restart talks held in abeyance since the Cox Commission report of 1999. One related terminological issue was rather disturbing. The Chinese participants noted that the term *anquan* in Chinese includes both sustainment on the one hand and “safety and security” on the other hand. American participants noted that there is arguably an interest in American support of Chinese efforts on safety and security, and perhaps in some contexts on surety as well. However, sustainment is an issue that neither side is likely interested in promoting in the other. Clearly, these concepts are differentiated

in the nuclear scientist community in China. However, the existence of such a terminological grey areas merits careful attention in future discussions among strategists.

Steps to Ease Crisis Management (Red Lines, Enhancing Communications, Transparency)

There were also a few modest, concrete ideas on crisis management that may be worth developing further in similar fora. First, in discussions on crisis management, the importance of direct communications highlights the importance of establishing a military-to-military hotline between the two sides. Several American participants noted that the U.S. side had long tabled this issue in official discussions. One Chinese panelist emphasized the importance of finding the right level for such communications. Given that military region (MR) commanders are not given significant authority and that the Ministry of Defense is primarily a shell organization, neither of those make sense for such a hotline. In this case, then, the hotline should not be connected to such offices as PACOM or OSD on the American side. Rather, the appropriate set of parallel institutions would be the U.S. Joint Staff and the PLA General Staff Department. Although from an American perspective this may not be as attractive as giving the PACOM commander someone he can get on the phone himself, it does have the advantage of creating a direct line with someone in uniform in China, rather than being constrained by any civil-military tensions there that might rise during a crisis.

Second, there was some discussion of the utility of having discussion, perhaps at the official or at least near-official level, on crisis management in Taiwan Strait contingencies, and potential red lines there.

Finally, as in previous track 1.5 and track 2 discussions, the Chinese side has expressed interest in further discussions at the strategic level, hoping to reduce American ambiguity on Taiwan and the rise of China more generally. Beyond that, there appears to be some interest in at least scoping the potential for official CBMs between the United States and China. There appears to be uncertainty on the Chinese side about what sorts of possible future official discussion with the United States might lead to in this area. American participants in this and related discussions have suggested the possibility of discussions of “transparency on transparency.” This might lay out what each side is asking for, and is not asking for, with regard to transparency from the other with regard to nuclear issues specifically.



Dr. James Wirtz, Dr. Jeffrey Larsen, Dr. Christopher Twomey, Mr. Mike Urena, and Dr. Pete Lavoy celebrate a successful conference.

Conclusions and Overall Assessments

Stepping back from the details of the conference, this final section offers few general assessments of this process. Track 1.5 and track 2 projects in general, and this Dialogue in particular, strive to serve several goals. Six will be highlighted here. First, they aim to provide a forum where each side can identify misperceptions held by the other side, *or by themselves*. Second, in the best case, they can—through dialogue—help to reduce those misperceptions (although this may lend itself better in some cases to contact at the official, track I level). Third, they also help each side to deepen their understanding of the other's threat perceptions and relevant domestic decision-making structures. These are important for understanding how to interpret the other side's behavior, the nature of its redlines, and to predict its future behavior.

Each of these first three goals requires a degree of transparency to be achieved, and in the Sino-American context, such transparency is lacking. Thus, a fourth goal is to enhance transparency between the two sides. Outgoing Secretary Rumsfeld has characterized the utility of formal contacts between the PLA and the U.S. military as follows: "Our goal from a military to military standpoint is to try to demystify what's taking place, demystify us to them and have them demystify them to us."^[4] Track 1.5 contacts can support this goal of mutual demystification through each of the four goals discussed above.

It should be noted that all of the first four above goals are in some sense modest. They only address areas of potential inadvertent conflict between the two sides. Historically speaking, substantial differences in national interests have been the course of much conflict between nations. There is little track 1.5 or track 2 sessions can do to address these. Rather, they attempt to address the sources of inadvertent conflict, a narrow goal, but an important one.^[5]

Two final potential benefits can accrue from track 1.5 contacts. Fifth, these sorts of meetings can also be used to reinforce or emphasize signals sent officially through track 1.5 contacts or, in rare cases, to serve as a backchannel to send or receive signals that are too sensitive to send through official channels. Sixth—and potentially most fundamentally—over the long term track 1.5 dialogues, together with track 2 conferences, can help to shape the way countries view their own interests, understand the world around them, and conceive of international relations at the broadest levels.

So, what does that suggest for the future of this Dialogue? It remains in an early stage of development but has had a number of small achievements as discussed above. For the most part, these fall under the general framework of contributing to a process of “mutual demystification.” One further success ought be mentioned: the conference series has contributed to the creation of a community of analysts on each side who understands the other sides’ threat perceptions and strategic beliefs a bit better. This understanding, of course, does not imply agreement, but in order to achieve the various goals as listed above, nurturing a group of people who can communicate clearly is important.

This project, and other lines of communication, can potentially address these issues over time. In order to do so, both sides must remain committed to offering high level participants empowered to speak on these sensitive issues. Without such participation by both sides, such fora will quickly degenerate into venues for declaring stated policy rather than a genuine two level communication. The issues at the heart of this process are vitally important for the two sides’ relationship. NPS looks forward to the opportunity to continue to facilitate this Dialogue.

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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.

References

1. For a useful description of this and related linguistic points, see Medeiros, Evan S. "Evolving Nuclear Doctrine," in Paul J. Bolt and Albert S. Willner, eds., *China's Nuclear Future* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006).
2. Interestingly, one Chinese participant argued that "war fighting" has only a simple meaning in Chinese, that of "actual fighting" rather than the more complex strategic concepts it represents in English.
3. A forthcoming book will address some of these issues in more detail, although it is not explicitly focused on their nuclear aspects. Michael D. Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng, ed., *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis* (New York: Brookings Press, 2006).
4. Comments from Shangri-la Dialogue, June 4, 2006.
5. There is a large academic literature that distinguishes between conflicts that are "rational" because they stem from differing interests and those that are avoidable given those interests, that come from misperceptions, miscommunications, misestimations, and other errors that may be preventable. The main contribution of this sort of meeting is to address those preventable sources of conflict.