



US-China Strategic Cooperation: Progress Continues, but Disagreements Remain by Ralph Cossa, Brad Glosserman, and David Santoro

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The cornerstone of China's nuclear weapons policy is its pledge of no-first use (NFU). That has been a constant since Beijing acquired its first nuclear weapon and China's call for others – particularly the United States – to follow suit has been the starting point of Chinese nuclear diplomacy. Not surprisingly, then, the failure to explicitly mention NFU in China's latest defense white paper triggered an uproar among China watchers in the strategic community. This is much ado about nothing!

Speculation regarding the omission of the NFU pledge in the White Paper was promptly shot down by authoritative Chinese commentators like Maj Gen. Yao Yunzhu who argued that there was no change in Chinese policy. But even if true, it would have mattered little as far as US military strategy is concerned since no sane military planner develops strategies based on the assumption that NFU is anything but a political statement (which could be changed overnight).

There are much bigger issues at stake than debates over NFU. China is the least transparent of the five nuclear weapon states (NWS) recognized by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the only one to both enhance and expand its nuclear forces in the context of its formidable re-rise. (The five NWS are China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.) This opacity, combined with a resistance to enter an official strategic dialogue with Washington, raises concerns and exposes Chinese statements to especially close scrutiny. It has resulted in the US Department of Defense's annual report to Congress on China's military developments. Deeply unpopular in China, the latest iteration of this report, published May 6, was described by Beijing as "baseless" and "counterproductive" for allegedly painting China as a growing military aggressor.

The absence of an official US-China strategic dialogue is worrisome. Adm. Samuel Locklear, Commander of the US Pacific Command, argued in a recent speech that the US-China relationship will remain competitive and that miscommunication and miscalculation are threats to the "Indo-Asia-Pacific community of peace and prosperity" that the two countries can create with focus and determination.

To foster greater understanding between the United States and China and prepare for/support an eventual official strategic dialogue, the Pacific Forum CSIS, with the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies, the Naval

Postgraduate School's Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction and Defense Threat Reduction Agency, has for several years conducted track-1.5 US-China strategic discussions. Our latest dialogue took place in Beijing last January, and attempted to identify areas of concern and potential collaboration as the Obama administration began its second term and the new Xi Jinping government took office in China.

Regarding specific key findings and next steps for future dialogue and action, eight areas stand out.

First, Chinese participants seemed to understand that the United States accepts mutual vulnerability with China, even though this cannot and will not be explicitly stated. But they expressed concerns that Washington is acquiring the capability to neutralize Beijing's deterrent (through advanced long-range conventional munitions and "multilayered" missile defense). Thus, there was occasional reference to the US desire for "absolute security" at the expense of China and others. The Chinese also insisted that Beijing is committed to a modest minimum deterrent, but that it will continue to develop a credible second-strike capability and that the size of this force will be determined by US capabilities to neutralize China's second strike.

Second, China and the United States agree on the overall goal of nonproliferation, but they disagree on how to achieve it and on its priority. China endorses engagement, dialogue, and peaceful means, while the United States is prepared to use a broader range of tools, including sanctions. Chinese acknowledge nonproliferation is a lower priority for China than for the United States. Some Chinese participants also argued that US nonproliferation policy is based on double standards by focusing on Iran and North Korea and ignoring Israel and India. (The Chinese seldom mention Pakistan in this context.)

Third, Chinese and US participants concurred that the United States and Russia have special responsibilities for advancing nuclear arms control and disarmament agendas given the size of their arsenals. The Chinese, however, seemed reluctant to acknowledge that Beijing's policies and lack of transparency could have a negative impact on further US-Russia reductions, given concerns about a Chinese "sprint to parity." A promising avenue for progress appeared to be within the P-5 context.

Fourth, there was a certain edge, both in the room and in the overall bilateral relationship, caused by increased Chinese assertiveness toward its neighbors (US view) and/or the US "rebalance" to Asia and its impact: an increased willingness by China's neighbors (especially US allies) to challenge its territorial sovereignty (Chinese view). One constant theme was concern about the potential for third parties to drag the United States and China into conflict. In this context, a few

Chinese participants emphasized the destabilizing effects of US extended deterrence, although more than in the past, they acknowledged its role in keeping US allies non-nuclear.

Fifth, when discussing cross-domain deterrence, Chinese and US participants agreed on the value of a wider dialogue rather than a narrow focus on nuclear dynamics. Discussions on missile defense, space, cyber, and conventional weapon dynamics are worthwhile, as is a discussion of interactions between them. Chinese participants, however, worried that discussing “deterrence” would reinforce the competitive elements in the relationship, to which Americans responded that it was important to distinguish between deterrence in peacetime, by denial, and by punishment. More clarity about these concepts is key to reducing chances of deterrence failure and conflict escalation.

Sixth, Chinese and US participants agreed that good communication is important to effectively manage crises. US participants, however, stressed that it is not enough and that the potential of mis-signaling is real. It thus appears essential to establish the “rules of the road” and study how signaling does and does not work.

Seventh, the Chinese provided rhetorical endorsement of official military-to-military exchanges, but stressed the need to identify “appropriate topics” and did not explain how to get such talks restarted. While echoing Chinese President Xi Jinping’s call for a “new type of major power relations,” the Chinese continued to express skepticism about entering an official strategic dialogue with Washington for fear that it would be “adversarial” and require transparency concessions on China’s part. Still, there was general agreement that Joint Principles for Mutual Strategic Reassurance should be developed.

Eighth, the tone of the space security discussion, which was first taken up in our January dialogue, was very positive. Highlighting the encouraging changes in US space policy from the Bush administration to the Obama administration, the Chinese insisted that Beijing is willing to engage in bilateral dialogue on space cooperation. Numerous issues remain, however. Misunderstandings and misperceptions about anti-satellite developments are many and both countries are not in sync on how to proceed with space arms control and codes of conduct. More discussions are needed, particularly to prevent space weaponization, control escalation, and avoid conflict in space.

The overall atmosphere was generally positive. For example, this year we were spared the litany of traditional Chinese complaints: there was almost no mention of Taiwan, no calls for the United States to adopt an NFU policy, and few complaints about US intrusions into China’s exclusive economic zones. AirSea Battle, which has been hotly debated in the past, was not mentioned once.

The new bête noir is the 2013 Defense Authorization Act, which is in Chinese eyes the latest “proof” of US hostile intent, particularly the call for a study of tunnels allegedly hiding large numbers of Chinese nuclear weapons. Of course, while some Chinese proved pragmatic and forward thinking, however cautiously, about an official strategic dialogue, others rehearsed old talking points. The visibility of this division is in

some ways as interesting and important as the other discussions during our meeting.

These observations, among others, are spelled out in depth in our just-released report, “Progress Continues, but Disagreements Remain: The Seventh China-US Dialogue on Strategic Nuclear Dynamics & The Inaugural China-US Dialogue on Space Security.” It is available online at http://csis.org/files/publication/issuesinsights_vol13no6.pdf. We encourage our readers to consult it for further details.

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