



Research Report

Stabilizing the **U.S.-China Rivalry**

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About This Report

This report assesses possible means of stabilizing the U.S.-China rivalry. It reflects the findings of a study in which we first examined the challenge of stabilizing strategic rivalries and the principles for doing so. We then assessed Chinese strategic intent, evaluating several recent analyses of Chinese-language documents, to determine the scope for stabilization. Finally, the study involved pairs of U.S. and Chinese scholars outlining the potential for stabilization in three issue areas: Taiwan, the South China Sea, and competition in science and technology. The report concludes with specific recommendations both for general stabilization of the rivalry as well as initiatives in each of those three areas.

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Summary

The geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China—with its overlapping economic, technological, military, political, and ideological components—has become the leading national security concern for both sides. The rivalry embodies many risks, not only for the two contestants but also for the world community—risks of outright military conflict, economic warfare, and political subversion, as well as the danger that tensions between the world’s two leading powers will destroy the potential for global consensus on such issues as climate and artificial intelligence. Moderating this rivalry therefore emerges as a critical goal, both for the United States and China and the wider world.

Yet, as happened during the Cold War, a pointed debate has emerged about whether stabilizing this rivalry—via norms that govern behavior, guardrails in the competition, mutual understanding and relationships, collaboration on select issues, and other elements of a geostrategic equilibrium—is even possible. Emphasizing accommodation and stability can be perceived as weakness, some suggest, arguing that the only appropriate U.S. strategy is to ratchet up the pressure as high as it can reasonably be pushed.

We began this project with a very different assumption: that stabilizing an ongoing rivalry is not only possible but can serve the interests of both sides—indeed, it is essential if conflict is to be avoided in a bitter global rivalry. The RAND project staff and other U.S. participants are deeply aware of China’s hostile, predatory, and sometimes aggressive actions, and that it is imperative for the United States to stand up to specific forms of bullying and manipulation. Our focus is not on ways to transcend or overcome the essential geopolitical disagreement at the core of the rivalry. Even short of transformation, we did not assume that a comprehensive agenda for coexistence—shifting the rivalry to a much less intense form of competition—was plausible at this stage. We sought in this analysis to assess a much more limited proposition: that even in the context of intense competition, it might be possible to find limited mechanisms of stabilization across several specific issue areas.

Approach

We first examined the challenge of stabilizing strategic rivalries and the principles for doing so. We then assessed Chinese strategic intent, evaluating several recent analyses of Chinese-language documents, to determine the scope for stabilization. Finally, the study involved pairs of U.S. and Chinese scholars outlining the potential for stabilization in three issue areas: Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the competition in science and technology. We also conducted literature reviews in two of those areas (Taiwan and the South China Sea) to uncover similar proposals made in other studies, and we list those in the relevant sections of Chapter 4. The

report concludes with specific recommendations both for general stabilization of the rivalry as well as initiatives in each of those three areas.

Findings and Recommendations

As noted above, we began this analysis from the proposition that the U.S.-China rivalry is not the product of misunderstanding or misperceptions: It is driven by conflicting interests, deep mistrust, and a mutual perception by both the United States and China that the other has the goal of disrupting and undermining their power. From the U.S. side, the contest is fueled by concerns about China's authoritarian governing system and clear evidence of predatory and aggressive behavior across many domains of competition. An effort to stabilize this rivalry does not imply that the United States should downplay the effort to compete and defend its interests or make dangerous concessions in the name of easing the rivalry.

China harbors goals and intentions that are inimical to U.S. interests. The Chinese government's approach to governance, to the extent that it is internationalized, could threaten U.S. values both at home and abroad. Beijing is seeking predominance across many areas of science and technology research and development in ways that could undermine the position of many U.S. business sectors—as has already occurred in such areas as solar cells and batteries—and leave the United States economically and technologically dependent on its greatest rival. Beijing appears determined to claim a coercive and overbearing degree of control over the internal political and economic choices of other countries.

The United States must take steps to head off the most dangerous Chinese ambitions and safeguard U.S. interests. Even as it does so, however, the United States must, as it did during the Cold War, also seek to keep the rivalry from descending into extreme and dangerous levels of tension. This analysis identified several broad principles that can guide efforts to stabilize intense rivalries:

1. Each side accepts, in ways that are deeply ingrained and broadly shared among decisionmaking officials, that some degree of *modus vivendi* must necessarily be part of the relationship.
2. Each side accepts the essential political legitimacy of the other.
3. In specific issue areas, especially those in dispute between the two sides, each side works to develop sets of shared rules, norms, institutions, and other tools that create lasting conditions of a stable *modus vivendi* within that domain over a specific period (such as three to five years).
4. Each side practices restraint in the development of capabilities explicitly designed to undermine the deterrent and defensive capabilities of the other in ways that would create an existential risk to its homeland.
5. Each side accepts some essential list of characteristics of a shared vision of organizing principles for world politics that can provide at least a baseline for an agreed status quo.

6. There are mechanisms and institutions in place—from long-term personal ties to physical communication links to agreed norms and rules of engagement for crises and risky situations—that help provide a moderating or return-to-stable-equilibrium function.

Drawing on those principles, we propose six broad-based initiatives to help moderate the intensity of the rivalry:

1. Clarify U.S. objectives in the rivalry with language that explicitly rejects absolute versions of victory and accepts the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.
2. Reestablish several trusted lines of communication between senior officials.
3. Improve crisis-management practices, links, and agreements between the two sides.
4. Seek specific new agreements—a combination of formal public accords and private understandings—to limit the U.S.-China cyber competition.
5. Declare mutual acceptance of strategic nuclear deterrence and a willingness to forswear technologies and doctrines that would place the other side's nuclear deterrent at risk.
6. Seek modest cooperative ventures on issues of shared interests or humanitarian concern.

Beyond those very broad stabilizing measures, we investigated three of the most perilous issues in the rivalry—Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the burgeoning competition in science and technology. In each, we assessed U.S. and Chinese interests and goals and attempted to discover possible elements of a stable equilibrium, at least in the medium-term—roughly the next five to seven years. Chapter 4 describes this analysis in detail; below, we list only the main recommendations. For each issue, we describe a theory of success guiding our proposed strategy and offer recommendations in three categories: overarching political or strategic messaging initiatives; near-term steps; and bolder initiatives that would promote stability but must await some thawing of the relationship.

In each of those sections, we emphasize the role that the credibility of U.S. commitments and deterrent power can play, alongside initiatives to reassure the other side and stabilize the relationship, in promoting stability. Drawing firm lines on unacceptable coercive behavior, for example, can pair effectively with specific stabilizing mechanisms to reduce the chances of escalatory moves. Seeking stability is not an alternative to calculated firmness: They are two sides of the same strategic approach.

Taiwan

Our theory of success for stabilizing the Taiwan issue focuses on creating the maximum incentive for Beijing to pursue gradual approaches to realizing its ultimate goal. Under such a theory, the focus of short- and medium-term stabilization efforts must be to (1) keep the prospect of war as hazardous and uncertain as possible for China, (2) avoid obvious provocations that would force Beijing's hand, (3) generate as many political reassurances as possible to leave Beijing comfortable with a patient approach, (4) reduce the risks of unplanned military

confrontations or accidents, and (5) create political and military mechanisms of communication to address ongoing disagreements and crisis dangers.

Using that theory of success as a guide, we propose ideas in three categories to help stabilize the U.S.-China rivalry on the Taiwan issue: political statements and reassurances, short-term measures, and bolder steps for later implementation. Because the Taiwan issue is fundamentally political, implementing the recommendations in the first category may be essential to facilitating the actions outlined in the other two categories.

In the area of broad political and strategic signaling, we offer the following three suggestions:

1. *The United States and China should exchange a mutual set of signals designed to build confidence that neither side harbors an intent to radically overturn the status quo in the near future.* This step would include mutual statements of visions required to avoid conflict, as well as agreements on broad principles of stability on the issue to which each side commits. Examples could include U.S. statements that it does not support Taiwan independence, seek a permanent separation across the Straits, or oppose peaceful unification. China could reaffirm that peaceful reunification is the preferred approach, describe persuasive ways that could happen, and clarify that the use of force is only an option under the most extreme circumstances stipulated in the Anti-Secession Law.
2. *Both sides could work to sustain a strong, ongoing dialogue between high-level officials on the Taiwan issue to avoid surprises.* Building on the messaging involved in our first suggestion, the United States and China could establish a regular dialogue on the issue involving senior officials to communicate concerns and help avoid crisis-generating surprises. For example, the United States and China could seek to increase the transparency of each other's moves, informing the other side about upcoming military maneuvering, arms sales, or major policy announcements to avoid surprises.
3. *Each side—in the U.S. case in cooperation with allies and partners—should continue to reinforce deterrence of destabilizing actions.* China can do this by clearly articulating its red lines in terms of statements and actions by the United States and Taiwan and specifying the type of responses crossing such red lines may elicit. The United States can continue to work with others to send multilateral signals that outright aggression—or extreme coercive moves, such as blockades and quarantines—will cause China to become an international pariah.

If the political reassurances proposed in the first category are sufficient for Beijing and Washington, there are some steps that could be achieved in the short term. We offer the following two:

1. *Empower a Track 2 process connected to high-level officials and military leaders that addresses strategic- and operational-level issues, while serving as a reliable backchannel for official communications in case formal channels break down.* Official communications on the Taiwan issue between the United States and China are restrained by official policy positions. A series of Track 2 dialogues could thus generate more understanding and potential solutions between the United States and China on the issue that would not be possible through official interactions.

2. *The United States and China should maintain existing and seek new ways to strengthen military-to-military communications and crisis communications links.* There are already military-to-military communications, protocols, and crisis communications channels in place. However, they often do not work, and Beijing has a tendency to cut them off in times of crisis. Nevertheless, these channels should be maintained and further strengthened based on results from an effective Track 2 process.

Finally, we offer one bolder option: *The United States could balance its commitments to Taiwan with leveraging its influence to ensure that Taiwan's actions do not escalate tensions with China and destabilize cross-Straits security.* Although the United States is not responsible for and cannot completely control the activities of Taiwan, it provides military support and de facto extended deterrence to Taiwan. Because of this, it has potential leverage over Taiwan to limit its activities that upset the status quo championed by the United States.

South China Sea

Our theory of success for a stabilization strategy in the South China Sea combines deterrence of military escalation with intensified multilateral and bilateral diplomacy to create a medium-term route to a peaceful solution as the default international process and expectation. Under such a theory, the focus of short- and medium-term stabilization efforts would be to (1) deter any claimants or other actors in the region from undertaking direct military aggression to achieve their goals, through a combination of military power and multilateral signaling; (2) discourage other claimants from taking provocative actions on secondary issues that would force Beijing's hand and produce crises; (3) initiate new processes of multilateral and bilateral diplomacy to create a default and required route to peaceful unification of disputes; (4) create new multilateral cooperative bodies on shared threats and issues, whether or not China will join them; and (5) rally broad-based international support for these processes, including signaling about the unacceptability of the use of force to resolve disputes or threaten free maritime transit.

Using that theory of success as a guide, we developed ideas in all three categories: political statements and reassurances, short-term measures, and bolder steps for later implementation. In the area of broad political and strategic signaling, we suggest three steps:

1. *The United States and the Philippines should continue to clarify, in coordination, the specific types of Chinese actions that would invoke obligations under the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.* This should not be done unilaterally by Washington, but rather in close consultation with Manila to preserve alliance cohesion and avoid overcommitment.
2. *Similarly, China can clarify its own red lines on very specific actions by the Philippines or other claimants that would require enhanced Chinese responses.* The United States can then employ its influence to persuade friends and allies in the region to respect those lines. The critical ingredient to this action will be the limited scope of the Chinese demands: If they are dramatic and continue to escalate, it will appear to

the United States and others that this avenue is being used as a cover to achieve larger Chinese objectives.

3. *The United States and China could issue coordinated political statements that signal mutual intent to keep the South China Sea competition within defined parameters.* The credibility of such statements would depend on modest expectations, mutuality of commitments, and follow-through over time. These would include more explicit U.S. statements that it recognizes China's interests in maintaining security relative to foreign military presence, and Chinese commitments to respect the freedom of maritime passage.

In the area of modest near-term steps, we propose three ideas:

1. *Strengthen mutual restraint between Beijing, Manila, and Washington over specific disputes around the Second Thomas Shoal, the Scarborough Shoal, and other features prone to incidents.* This can be built on mutual statements of actions that each side forswears outside extreme cases. Each side can contribute to this step through restraint in military activities, including selected limitations on patrols and navigation operations.
2. *Seek to develop a bilateral code of conduct for incidents in the region, building upon the provisional agreement reached in July 2024.* This process could build on existing agreements including the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, the Memorandum of Understanding Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters, and the Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism.
3. *Without scaling back legal or operational presence, the United States could selectively reduce the publicity surrounding certain intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) flights or freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs).* This would avoid undermining legal principles or alliance confidence while testing whether a less visible posture yields reciprocal restraint.

Finally, in the category of bolder ideas that can be developed for later possible implementation, we suggest two possibilities:

1. *China and the United States could modify their military doctrines and force structures to maintain a peaceful military relationship in the South China Sea.* Both sides could adopt a military strategy that combines defense and access, rather than one emphasizing offense and control. While doctrinal change is difficult, credible signals, such as force deployment patterns, operational narratives, and authoritative white paper language, could demonstrate a strategic shift away from control-seeking behavior.
2. *The United States could signal privately that some ISR or FONOP activity might be open to negotiation, conditional on China shifting away from its maximalist historical rights claims or demonstrating flexibility in code of conduct negotiations.* A credible but conditional willingness to scale back the most visible elements of U.S. military signaling could serve as a valuable confidence-building measure, especially if sequenced alongside visible Chinese restraint. Care must be taken to avoid undermining the confidence of allies or weakening normative commitments to freedom of navigation.

Science and Technology Competition

Our theory of success for stabilizing the science and technology rivalry can be described as managing the worst aspects of emerging technologies for mutual security and the condition of the rivalry while stepping back from the most extreme versions of efforts to undermine the other side's progress. Under such a theory, the focus of short- and medium-term stabilization efforts would be to (1) identify and mitigate a small number of the most dangerous possible competitive uses of emerging technologies, through a combination of deterrence and bilateral (or multilateral) agreements; (2) agree on limits to efforts to undermine the rival's scientific and technological progress; and (3) identify limited, nonthreatening areas where actual collaboration remains possible.

Using that theory of success as a guide, we developed ideas in all three categories: political statements and reassurances, short-term measures, and bolder steps for later implementation. In the area of broad political and strategic signaling, we suggest two steps:

1. *The United States and China should offer general political reassurances about their intentions in this competition, combined with selected commitments on the limits of the competitive space.* These statements would involve, for example, U.S. statements that it does not seek to retard China's general economic development, that it welcomes cooperation and trade in many high-tech areas, and that it will not impose constraints on the relationship in selected areas of science and technology.
2. *The United States and China could initiate Track 1.5 dialogues to expand mutual understanding on emerging areas of technology.* The goal would be to establish a forum in which mutual concerns could be raised, definitional issues discussed, and frameworks for assessing risk could be developed.

In the area of modest near-term steps, we propose five ideas:

1. *Both sides could make careful deterrent commitments to rule out the most destabilizing actions in this competition.* They could, for example, clarify that direct interference with critical science and technology assets in their homelands—including research labs, data centers, and semiconductor production facilities—would generate immediate and proportional responses.
2. *Each side could make selected, reciprocal promises of restraint in the pursuit and use of specific technologies.* These could include limits on gain-of-function research on biology and the use of artificial intelligence (AI)—empowered cyber capabilities in peacetime. The two sides could also formalize the agreement made between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping not to use AI for the command and control of nuclear weapons.
3. *The United States and China could attempt to deepen their dialogue on the trajectory and risks of AI, building on the single major intergovernmental dialogue held so far.* The time may be right to make another effort to significantly deepen the existing channel.
4. *The two countries could expand basic science collaboration under the U.S.-China Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement in areas of limited security concern.*

This could include investments by both sides in joint basic science research in several carefully selected areas deemed to be of limited security concerns.

5. *The United States and China could seek greater cooperation in specific limited areas of non-threatening technology*, including an “AI for Good” initiative and collaboration on clean energy technology.

Finally, in the category of bolder ideas that can be developed for later possible implementation, we suggest two possibilities:

1. *Undertake deeper cooperation and development of mitigation measures for potential AI loss of control events.* Beyond the AI dialogue suggested above, the United States and China—perhaps in concert with several other countries leading the development of AI—could undertake more detailed and focused assessment of possible misalignment dangers, identifying specific loss-of-control events and how the two sides could collaborate in preserving state control of AI systems and avoiding the worst outcomes.
2. *Identify limited areas for a return to deep and regular U.S.-China collaboration in basic science, including joint research between U.S. and Chinese universities and exchanges of students and researchers.* This would build on the more limited, near-term search for areas of possible research noted above and aspire to a time when the constraints on mutual scientific collaboration are significantly eased.

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1. Introduction

The geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC)—with its overlapping economic, technological, military, political, and ideological components—has become the leading national security concern for both sides. It is emerging as the fulcrum of world politics in the early 21st century, the most essential dynamic around which other international events and national choices revolve. The rivalry embodies many risks, not only for the two contestants but also for the world community—risks of outright military conflict, economic warfare, and political subversion, but also the danger that tensions between the world's two leading powers will destroy the potential for global consensus on such issues as climate and artificial intelligence (AI).

On the U.S. side of the relationship, the emphasis on finding an avenue to engagement and coexistence under a shared international framework, which had characterized U.S. policy for 30 years, has largely ended, and U.S. policies—as the scholar Hal Brands has put it—now focuses “on penalizing Beijing’s revisionist behavior.” Meanwhile “Today, far from preparing for détente, Xi’s government is hoarding food and fuel, churning out weapons, and making moves that suggest it may be preparing for war.”¹ Both the United States and China are taking broad ranges of actions—in domains such as trade, technology, diplomacy, export controls, military posture, and cyber operations—designed to disrupt the strategies and interests of the other side.

China has some goals that are inimical to U.S. interests. Beijing’s current approach to governance, to the extent that it is internationalized, could threaten U.S. values both at home and abroad. Beijing is seeking predominance across many areas of science and technology research and development in ways that could undermine the position of many U.S. business sectors—as has already occurred in such areas as solar cells and batteries—and leave the United States economically and technologically dependent on its greatest rival.

The United States must take steps to head off the most dangerous Chinese ambitions and safeguard U.S. interests. Even as it does so, however, the United States must, as it did during the Cold War, also seek to keep the rivalry from descending into extreme and dangerous levels of tension. The immense risks of a completely destabilized, out-of-control rivalry mean that creating a stable equilibrium in the rivalry is as critical to long-term U.S. interests as competing effectively.

¹ Brands, “How Does This End? The Future of U.S.-China Competition,” pp. 4, 7.

The Urgent Need to Stabilize a Dangerous Rivalry

Moderating this rivalry therefore emerges as a critical goal, both for the United States and China and the wider world. Yet, as happened during the Cold War, a pointed debate has emerged about whether stabilizing this rivalry—via high-level political reassurances and commitments, norms that govern behavior, guardrails in the competition, deeply-grounded relationships among senior officials, collaboration on select issues, and other elements of a geostrategic equilibrium—is even possible. Some skeptics emphasize the natural trajectory of severe bilateral rivalries between great powers, suggesting that they are very difficult to control and that some specific factors (such as power transitions) pose high risks of war. Others who downplay the potential for stabilizing the contest focus on China’s ambitions, arguing that, like prior aggressive revisionists, the current Chinese regime is uninterested in peaceful coexistence.

In either case, some observers suggest that emphasizing accommodation and stability can be perceived as weakness. A persistent effort to seek dialogue with Beijing in contrast to containment, argued former congressman Mike Gallagher, risks “creating a permissive environment that feeds Xi Jinping’s appetite for conquest and invites war.”²

What we are beginning to see is in many ways a replay of the Cold War debate about détente. Recurrently during the U.S.-Soviet contest, American presidents, in some cases long before the paradigmatic era of détente in the 1970s, sought to bring predictability and mutual restraint to the competition, in part to reduce the risk of war but also for other purposes—to signal to allies and friends that the United States was responsible, to reduce U.S. defense and foreign policy commitments, to address domestic opposition, or for other purposes. Critics at the time and since have branded such efforts as foolish and indeed dangerous. They contend that with an ideologically irreconcilable, implacably hostile and potentially adventurist government like the former Soviet Union, the only appropriate U.S. strategy is to ratchet up the pressure as high as it can reasonably be pushed, to put the rival under maximum geopolitical and economic pressure.³

We began this project with a very different assumption: that stabilizing even an intense ongoing rivalry is not only possible but can serve the interests of both sides—indeed, is essential if conflict is to be avoided. The RAND project staff and other U.S. participants are deeply aware of China’s hostile, predatory, and sometimes aggressive actions, and that it is imperative for the United States to stand up to specific forms of bullying and manipulation. We take seriously the normative issues surrounding China’s governing system, and the ways in which Beijing sometimes attempts to export its enforcement of orthodoxy and limits on free speech. We also recognize that Chinese officials see the U.S. emphasis on democracy as a means of destabilizing

² Gallagher, “America Needs a Strategy for China.”

³ Mike Gallagher and Matthew Pottinger specifically apply the lesson of failed détente to current China policy in “No Substitute for Victory,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2024.

their system, and some elements of U.S. Indo-Pacific presence as designed to forcibly contain Chinese power.

One implication of these facts is that the rivalry is not some sort of grand misunderstanding that could be cured if only the two sides would comprehend each other better. Some of China's apparent ambitions, and the means it employs to realize them, are unacceptable to the United States and to many other countries. The United States is determined—in the view of U.S. participants in this project, rightly so—to uphold critical norms and to sustain its role as a security balancer in the region in ways that China views as unwarranted interference in its rightful interests and place in world politics. The United States and China have some conflicting interests and view each other's actions with significant mistrust and even paranoia.

Our focus here is not on ways to transcend or overcome the essential geopolitical disagreement at the core of the rivalry. Such a radical step is simply not plausible today, given the contrasting views of the world and mutual suspicion that pervades the U.S.-China relationship. We are seeing worsening manifestations of a dangerous fact: An extreme level of mistrust bordering at times on paranoia lies at the very roots of the current Sino-American relationship. We therefore did not assume that a comprehensive agenda for coexistence—shifting the rivalry to a much less intense form of competition—was plausible at this stage. We sought in this analysis to assess a much more limited proposition: that even in the context of an intense competition, it might be possible to find limited mechanisms of stabilization across several specific issue areas.

This analysis aims to discover elements of a *modus vivendi* in areas of clear disagreement and potential conflict. Observers often propose building U.S.-China cooperation on issues of common concern—climate, pandemics, nonproliferation—as a way to calm the rivalry. But such efforts will be subverted if the overall relationship becomes dangerously hostile, and indeed China seems to have little interest in real cooperation in those areas, at least to a degree that would have significant geopolitical echo effects. If Washington and Beijing cannot stabilize some of the major areas of dispute in their relationship, they could slide toward total zero-sum thinking and even conflict.

Goals of the Project

This project seeks to map out pathways to more-stable interactions on major issues of dispute between the United States and China. In the Cold War, even as the United States strove for systemic superiority and sought to deter many forms of aggression, another factor was essential to success: a long series of issue-specific negotiations, agreements, and accommodations that helped to discover tentative elements of a shared status quo.

Pursuing such a shared status quo—even in terms well short of a comprehensive resolution of the rivalry—is immensely difficult in any intense geopolitical confrontation. Elements of stability will not remove all the danger from the rivalry: The many accords and agreements in the

Cold War didn't keep Yuri Andropov, as late as 1983, from thinking that the United States was preparing to launch a nuclear first strike. Frameworks of coexistence tend to emerge over long periods of time, through accumulating steps, rather than all at once, and thus take time to have real effect on the rivalry.

Moreover, achieving a truly shared and stable accommodation demands painful concessions from each side, some of which inevitably conflict with deeply held norms or concepts of international politics and foreign policy. In the case of post-Cold War Europe, a more lasting Euro-Atlantic settlement would have required the West to place limits on its security relationship with countries on the Russian periphery in ways that contradicted values of autonomy and sovereign independence. In Asia today, China has fairly rigid views of its rightful place in a hierarchical regional power structure that may leave little room for a shared status quo.

Indeed, one finding of this research is that the United States and China have very different ideas about what a "stable status quo" even means on the major issues we reviewed. In all three cases to different degrees and in different ways, the United States hopes to lock in some form of present arrangements: the absence of conflict or severe coercion around Taiwan, the absence of Chinese domination and the right of multiple states to pursue their claims in the South China Sea, and a situation of U.S. leadership in science and technology. China is anxious to force change in all three issue areas to its advantage and considers the U.S. definition of a *stable status quo* (as we have described it here) to be a way of constraining its ambitions. Just identifying the equilibrium that stabilization measures would be designed to preserve can be difficult.

An added complication is that, in all three areas, frameworks of stable rivalry between major rivals are never purely bilateral settlements. They engage the interests, ambitions, and behavior of third parties—either the subjects of great-power ambitions or important middle powers with a voice in world politics. A shared status quo is always a multilateral arrangement, which further complicates the task of fashioning one.⁴

But if the trajectory of hostility in U.S.-China relations is to be arrested short of conflict or a perilous series of crises, and if we are to build any hope for mellowing this relationship in broader ways, something like a shared status quo will be essential even as the two systems remain ideologically and geopolitically at odds. And that framework must be developed on many specific issues, with deep and rigorous attention to the details and complexities of each one.

U.S. strategy today appears to reflect little hope for developing such a framework. Nor does the vast majority of the published work on U.S.-China relations, which tends to focus on areas of competition. A smaller set of studies have looked at the potential for collaboration on specific issues, ranging from cyber threats to climate to illegal drug shipments. But these generally focus on immediate goals, trying to identify places where the interests of the two sides converge and

⁴ This analysis relies significantly on an earlier RAND study on the elements of stability in global competitions: Mazarr, Charap, et al., *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*.

where near-term cooperation might be possible. Absent any movement toward a shared status quo on issues of contention, such shorter-term cooperation is highly constrained.

What is missing is a longer-term perspective on the potential for a shared status quo or vision of stable competition on major issues of contention—one that emerges from a dialogue of U.S. and Chinese experts. This research effort aims to fill that gap, identifying a representative set of issues in dispute between the United States and China and commissioning U.S., Chinese, and other international experts to design a road map to a vision of coexistence on each of them. The focus is not merely on areas for near-term cooperation, but rather the possibilities for gradual movement toward more-comprehensive arrangements that reflect an issue-specific version of a shared status quo.

To be clear, we are painfully aware of the constraints on the possibility of any significant near-term stabilizing moves that would require anything like a concession from either side. As we'll describe in Chapter 4, we have two broad time periods in mind with this analysis. One is the current moment (as of this writing in early summer 2025), a period of intense mistrust and zero-sum thinking in which stabilizing efforts are badly needed but also have to fight uphill on both sides against the momentum of mistrust and competitive drives. As long as the U.S.-China rivalry has been discussed, in its current form, relative to major rivalries throughout history, it remains in its very early stages, periods when rivals are typically learning to understand one another and testing the limits of the possible and mechanisms of a stable rivalry have not yet been deeply ingrained. It therefore harbors significant instability and potential for escalatory hostilities.

The second time frame we have in mind looks ahead to a medium-term future in which the rivalry matures, when both sides perhaps come to understand the constraints on their ambitions somewhat better, and when—in all likelihood—a series of confrontations and crises have clarified the risks of an unstable competition. That future, at least several years off and possibly more than a decade, will also at some point involve new leadership on both sides, which could open the way for initiatives to shift the trajectory of the relationship.

Our analysis and proposals consider both of these time frames, with the recognition that more-ambitious efforts to stabilize the rivalry and even inch toward some form of formalized coexistence will have to wait until the later time period. In particular, in the three issue areas we considered, we do not believe that the current context is likely to allow any radical, big-swing initiatives to create a fundamentally new strategic reality around Taiwan, the South China Sea, or the science and technology competition. There is an important role for diplomacy in all three cases, but no grand bargains on the horizon. U.S. officials have labored for years to find areas of common action and compromise, with relatively little to show for their efforts.

An additional challenge to any sort of diplomacy is posed by the decay of working-level discussions across many departments, agencies, and ministries of both governments. There are very few trusted channels of communication and dialogue today, making diplomatic advances on specific issues extremely difficult. One implication is that the relationship is now in many ways

dominated by leader-to-leader discussions, more so than at most times in the past several decades. This can potentially offer avenues for progress if the two leaders decide to take bold steps in the name of moderating the rivalry. But it also constrains the potential for more incremental, working-level progress.

The goal of this effort is therefore not to develop finished road maps for shared status quo settlements on each of these issues. The goal is twofold: to bring greater attention to the need to develop such visions, and to lay out an initial set of proposals for first steps in several critical areas. Such longer-term thinking about stable coexistence in the U.S.-China relationship is urgently needed as a complement to the important—but insufficient—policy attention and literature focused on ways to compete effectively.

Approach

To address these issues, we undertook three lines of research and one phase of dialogue. First, we reviewed existing literature on great-power rivalries and international competition to discover potential sources of stability in the U.S.-China contest. This work built on a major 2021 RAND study on stabilizing great-power rivalries and added fresh reviews of international relations literature on these topics. Chapter 2 offers this analysis.

Second, we conducted secondary and Chinese-language research to assess claims that the Chinese government has elaborate objectives that make any form of stability essentially impossible in the relationship. We reviewed such claims in several major recent works that draw on Chinese sources to make these claim and returned to the Chinese-language originals to offer a modified perspective in support of our overall argument. Our findings are summarized in Chapter 3.

Third, we conducted and commissioned research on three specific issue areas in the competition: Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the emerging contest in science and technology. We chose these issues because they are among the most dangerous and potentially intractable disputes at the core of the U.S.-China rivalry. We generated a common template for authors to assess each issue and sought to produce ideas for stabilizing the rivalry in those high-pressure areas. We also conducted literature reviews of published studies on U.S.-China relations on the Taiwan and South China Sea issues and included recommendations in those existing studies in our candidate lists. Fourth and finally, we held a virtual workshop with a collection of leading experts on the U.S.-China relationship to assess the issue papers and to generate additional ideas for stabilizing the rivalry in those three areas. Chapter 4 summarizes the results of that work and offers an overall agenda for stabilizing the rivalry.

The result of this work is therefore a general argument about how to conceptualize a stabilization of the U.S.-China rivalry and a list of options for doing so in three especially fraught areas of competition. Our goal was not to offer a final and comprehensive agenda to stabilize the

U.S.-China relationship so much as to spark discussion on the potential nature and scope of an effort to create a more lasting equilibrium even in a strongly contested rivalry.

2. The Problem of Coexistence in the U.S.-China Rivalry

The contest between the United States and China is not the first great-power rivalry to raise the problem of stabilizing potentially dangerous dynamics. Throughout the modern history of international relations—even laying aside pre-modern confrontations—great powers in Europe and Asia have sought to stabilize their competitions even as they vigorously sought relative advantage. With the exception of a few unrestrained revisionist or predator states, most great powers have realized that their interests are served by such calming mechanisms.

It is therefore useful to place the potential for a stable equilibrium in the U.S.-China rivalry into a larger context. In this chapter, we examine this question of coexistence within rivalry—what some recent observers have described as “managed competition” or “competitive coexistence”—in historical terms. Our objective is to both appreciate the historical precedents for such an effort and define the concept more precisely, providing a better sense of what it is we are trying to cultivate in the U.S.-China relationship—which is more limited than some more-ambitious agendas for broad-based coexistence.

Stable Rivalries: The Idea of Coexistence in Historical Context

Surprisingly, many essential concepts around the issue of international competitive dynamics—including terms as basic as *competition*—are poorly defined and conceptualized in the writings on world affairs.⁵ The notion of *rivalry* is better understood: It is a situation in which two or more great powers of roughly equivalent power hold perceptions of mutual hostile intentions and lack of trust, have a history of conflict and contestation and some expectation of future conflict, and hold opposing or even irreconcilable views on important policy issues.⁶

Many such rivalries do not end in total war, however. Most end at some point. And nearly all have been characterized by some degree of conscious moderation—efforts to build a degree of restraint and stability into a contest that both (or all) sides agree will still reflect a highly competitive search for competitive advantage. Such efforts at stability can take various forms.

Coexistence as Resolution of a Rivalry

One common understanding of coexistence as a concept suggests that it is achieved when great powers largely transcend their rivalry and create a new relationship of trust and respect, if not actual friendship or alliance. This may be one reason why some observers today recoil at the

⁵ Mazarr, Blake, et al., *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition*, pp. 3–5.

⁶ Mazarr, Charap, et al., *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*, p. 10. Leading works on rivalry include Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson, *Strategic Rivalries in World Politics*; Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*; Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly, *How Rivalries End*, 2013; and Thompson, “Identifying Rivals and Rivalries in World Politics.”

idea of coexistence in the U.S.-China context—a common understanding of that term would imply a goal of fundamentally surmounting the competition, something that seems unlikely in the near term.⁷

Several analysts and scholars during the Cold War sought to unpack the idea of coexistence in this way, especially those writing in the later phases of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. The scholar Ken Booth argued right at the end of the Cold War for “a shared practice, and even theory, of coexistence between East and West.” The need was obvious, he wrote: “Cold War thinking and behavior—mutual threat inflation, high levels of military power, intra-bloc discipline, implicit enemy imaging and so on—are out of touch with a world of complex interdependence. The need for the coexistence of the Eastern and Western blocs is increasingly recognized.”⁸ Yet Cold War habits and mindsets persisted, and a conscious effort at stabilizing East-West relations—seeking some form of coexistence—was urgently required.

Booth proposed an elaborate, three-stage vision of coexistence. First would come a period of “constructive engagement” lasting a full decade in which the two sides would establish reciprocal rules of engagement that safeguarded the interests of both sides, to become “reasonably confident of each other’s intentions and behavior.” This phase would demand agreements on many thorny issues, such as the future status of Germany and Eastern Europe, and could be supported by symbolic acts of cooperation and mutual respect. The ultimate goal of this phase was to achieve “over the next decade a predictable relationship of constructive engagement, a mature *détente*.”⁹

That initial phase would be followed by the building of a “legitimate international order” over the following 15 years. By this he meant a formalized set of agreements and institutions, on the rough model of the Concert of Europe, in which each great power would have its essential interests guaranteed, and all could comfortably exist as status quo powers. “International security will exist when the members of international society reach common consent about the rules of behavior between them and about the practical implementation of those rules.”¹⁰

Finally, with trust and institutions of cooperation well established, East and West could transition to the third phase of “stable peace.” He defined it as a “condition in international relations in which war is thought unlikely not because of a threat of mutual annihilation, but because of mutual satisfaction with the prevailing situation. It is a peace based upon a political

⁷ Even in 1960, George F. Kennan argued that “In the public debate that has marked the progress of what is called the cold war, no term has been used more loosely, and at times unscrupulously, than the word ‘coexistence’” (Kennan, “Peaceful Coexistence: A Western View,” p. 171).

⁸ Booth, “Steps Towards Stable Peace in Europe,” pp. 17–18.

⁹ Booth, “Steps Towards Stable Peace in Europe,” pp. 23–26.

¹⁰ Booth, “Steps Towards Stable Peace in Europe,” p. 27.

relationship, rather than on cosmic fear.”¹¹ Booth noted that the end he had in mind was similar to the scholar Karl Deutsch’s idea of a “security community,” a group of states who view themselves as part of a community of shared interests and have a strong expectation of peaceful relations.

In a similar vein to Booth’s agenda for resolving the Cold War into a period of coexistence, Charles Kupchan has written eloquently about how rivalries can give way to geopolitical partnerships. Kupchan suggests that rivals can ease their antagonism and even become geopolitical partners through a four-stage process: accommodation, mutual restraint, social integration of the two societies, and the development of new narratives and identities. In a very few cases, such as the postwar process of the European Union, these processes can generate deeply cooperative institutions.¹²

These accommodations are fragile and can easily be disrupted. Kupchan’s review of the historical record showed that “progression from early to more advanced stages of stable peace is by no means necessary and that regression from stable peace back to enmity is possible, if not common.”¹³ Three other scholars have described the very significant conditions that must be met for rivalries to end. The moment must be ripe, Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly explain, and there must be leaders on both sides anxious to ensure that the effort to transcend the rivalry succeeds. Rivalries, they suggest, “de-escalate or end when adversaries assume new interpretations, understandings, and expectations of their opponents,” a process that only occurs in specific situations.¹⁴

After a review of several leading historical cases of eased rivalries, Kupchan outlined several requirements for such a process to occur. Each of the rivals must reflect “institutionalized constraint,” domestic political structures that dampen excessive ambitions. The two rivals must have “compatible social orders”—that is, major economic, social, and political interest groups in the societies cannot have zero-sum goals—as well as some degree of “cultural commonality.”¹⁵ Needless to say, these criteria do not currently hold in the U.S.-China relationship.

Coexistence Versus Stability

From these examples, it becomes clear that the goal we propose seeking in the U.S.-China relationship today is distinct from more comprehensive ideas of coexistence or seeking an “end” to rivalries. It is possible to envision ways in which the rivalry could be transcended in more fundamental terms, along, for example, the trajectory suggested by Booth or Kupchan. It is also

¹¹ Booth, “Steps Towards Stable Peace in Europe,” p. 29. Booth borrowed the term *stable peace* from the scholar Kenneth Boulding.

¹² Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*.

¹³ Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, p. 72.

¹⁴ Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly, *How Rivalries End*, pp. 12, 15.

¹⁵ Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, p. 6.

possible to imagine less absolute conclusions to the rivalry that still involve a decisive shift from zero-sum confrontation.¹⁶ But our focus here is on a more modest but still critical step: finding a stable *modus vivendi*, on specific issues of dispute and in the rivalry as a whole, that can generate a stable equilibrium in the competition that helps avoid crisis and conflict and that creates room for modest but important cooperative initiatives. We are interested in a process of finding ways to live together without presuming any broader good relationship or friendship.

The origins of the idea of coexistence in Soviet doctrine highlight a similarly limited—but still real—notion of at least a temporary stabilization of rivalry. In one sense, the Soviet concept of “peaceful coexistence” as a component of its foreign policy narrative, from the 1920s onward, signaled not a true acceptance of the West in a legitimate *modus vivendi* as much as a temporary truce while Marxist dynamics ate away at the capitalist world. One scholar has noted that, in Lenin’s conception, “Peaceful coexistence will have to remain competitive, since the socialist state would constantly seek to demonstrate, by force of example, the superiority of its system in promoting the economic growth of society and the welfare of the working people.”¹⁷ George Kennan wrote sharply that “there could be few propositions more amazing” that the idea that the Soviet Union—busily promoting socialist revolutions abroad and physically occupying neighboring territories—adhered to any meaningful principle of peaceful coexistence.¹⁸

Yet Lenin and other early Soviet leaders saw the period of stable peace with the capitalist countries as a period that could last decades. The idea allowed full economic relations with capitalist countries and many sorts of steps to promote peace and stability. Even from the beginning, then, Soviet doctrine, as committed as it was to victory over capitalism, accepted the need for some minimal degree of “cohabitation.”¹⁹ It did allow an adventuristic conception of promoting socialist transformations—but also allowed for at least temporary stability in relations with the capitalist countries.²⁰ This pragmatic and patient approach would help justify later, even more elaborate postponements of the end of capitalism during the period of détente.²¹

Adam Ulam noted in 1985 the long litany of Soviet belligerence and East-West conflicts that had produced a bitter rivalry, one not subject to resolution at that time. But he also noted that by the 1970s, the need for some sort of moderating elements in the rivalry had become clear. The persistent dangers of the Cold War brought “an enhanced awareness that the realities of the

¹⁶ Mazarr, “Imagining the Endgame of the US-China Rivalry.”

¹⁷ Chossudovsky, “Genoa Revisited,” p. 559.

¹⁸ Kennan, “Peaceful Coexistence,” p. 172.

¹⁹ Chossudovsky, “Genoa Revisited,” p. 569.

²⁰ Even Kennan concluded, despite his critical view of Soviet hypocrisy, that “The fact that an ideological disagreement of this nature exists is in itself no reason why peaceful coexistence, as Mr. Khrushchev defines it, should not prevail. There is nothing new in the prolonged peaceful residence, side by side, of ideologically antagonistic system” (Kennan, “Peaceful Coexistence,” p. 177).

²¹ Shulman, “Toward a Western Philosophy of Coexistence,” p. 36.

international situation and of the atomic age constrained both sides to continue a dialogue and attempts at a rapprochement. The nuclear non-proliferation agreement of 1968 was one evidence of this common-sense recognition.”²²

In an earlier period, the Concert of Europe reflected something of a middle ground between full rivalry and cooperative relations. European great powers—and especially their ruling monarchical families—saw themselves as sharing a single dominant interest in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars: promoting stability and ensuring stable rule on conservative principles. The horrific destruction of those wars—over 4 million people died in the first long set of them—left the great powers of Europe with an intense and urgent interest in stabilizing their differences. In the Concert, they developed a process that led them to restrain their actions, collaborate on crisis management, and to begin to see themselves as part of a shared security community in some ways.²³ The historian Paul Schroeder has termed the Concert “a profound change in the accepted rules of European statecraft.”²⁴

Yet these partial accommodations did not end the rivalries. They only tempered them for a time. The feuds began to reappear in increasingly bitter colonial contests and other competitive steps and began collapsing in more fundamental terms with the Crimean War. By the late 19th century, major European powers were fighting again, and by the early 20th, Europe would once again collapse into incredibly destructive continental wars.

Détente in the Cold War

The best-known modern version of great powers seeking a stabilized competition even as they continued to seek advantage was the Cold War period of détente, which in formal terms spanned roughly the years 1968 to 1979. This period has become shrouded in myth and misunderstanding as various observers, both at the time and later, sought to portray it in ways that suited some preconception or political purpose. The reality of détente, as both strategy and historical reality, is more nuanced than many subsequent treatments have suggested.

Détente's Purposes

In truth, détente emerged in part because both sides in the Cold War came to realize that a totally unregulated and unrestricted contest was unaffordable, and in fact threatened their survival. This realization emerged in more places than Washington and Moscow: Initiatives such as West Germany's idea of *Ostpolitik* were grounded in similar insights and sought similar goals.

²² Ulam, “Forty Years of Troubled Coexistence,” p. 27.

²³ Elrod, “The Concert of Europe.” Henry Kissinger argued that “To Metternich's contemporaries the unity of Europe was a reality, the very ritualism of whose invocation testified to its hold on the general consciousness” (Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812–22* p. 320).

²⁴ Schroeder, “The Nineteenth Century System,” p. 142.

U.S. and Soviet leaders during the heyday of détente embraced the two core defining aspects of a stable competition: They sought some elements of an agreed status quo, including arms control regimes, and they established personal ties between officials, as well as mechanisms of crisis management, that helped the overall relationship to return to an equilibrium

Détente reflected this recognition. While both sides saw the idea of a stabilized rivalry as useful in competitive terms, it was not, as some critics have since charged, fundamentally a Soviet plan to pull strategic wool over American eyes while they undermined U.S. interests. (We examine the actual experience of détente, and the criticisms of it, in more detail below.) Both sides continued to compete and seek advantage but also appreciated the importance of doing so within some sort of framework for stabilizing the contest short of war.²⁵ That required both formalized agreements (such as arms control treaties) and efforts to build mutual understanding and personal relationships that could establish enough trust to weather inevitable crises. As Ulam put it,

Détente, in the Kremlin's view, was not meant as a sharp break with its traditional policies. Competition with the United States for worldwide influence would continue, and not only, as Moscow's spokesmen piously declared, at the ideological level. At the same time, that competition would now be subject to certain rules and cautions intended to prevent it from turning into sharp clashes and possible confrontations.²⁶

Moreover, the basic goals of détente—to stabilize a perilous rivalry through a combination of dialogue, formal negotiations and agreements, personal relationships, and mutual restraint and occasional direct accommodations—was hardly unique to the specific decade that bears that name. U.S. presidents from the very beginning engaged in versions of these approaches, acting out of the unavoidable necessity of avoiding the worst outcomes in a contest that threatened mutual survival. From Eisenhower through Nixon, U.S. strategy therefore embodied a combination of pressure and confrontation on the one hand with negotiation, compromise, and active efforts to seek a stable equilibrium on the other. These instincts were powerfully on display in the Eisenhower administration, for example, reflected in Ike's rejection of rollback as a strategy and willingness to stand by as the French lost at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and during the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956.²⁷ Other examples of a search for stability included Kennedy's Turkey concession in the Cuban missile crisis, Johnson's avoidance of great-power escalation in Vietnam, and a whole series of treaties and agreements that regulated aspects of the competition.

²⁵ This was partly a lesson drawn from near-miss crises that could have sparked an all-out nuclear war. See McWhinney, "'Coexistence,' the Cuba Crisis, and Cold War International Law."

²⁶ Ulam, "U.S.-Soviet Relations," p. 27.

²⁷ Saunders, "Military Force in the Foreign Policy of the Eisenhower Presidency"; McCauley, "Hungary and Suez, 1956: The Limits of Soviet and American Power."

All during this period, the essential U.S. approach reflected an essential distinction between transcending a rivalry and working toward a more limited but still crucial *modus vivendi*, a stabilized competition in which each side still sought competitive advantage. The goal of détente was not to resolve the danger of Soviet power or stop the search for relative power, but to regulate the competition to achieve several specific goals, from easing the cost of the Cold War to avoiding spirals of conflict that would threaten American national survival. This distinction helps understand some of the attacks on détente: If viewed as an agreement to end the Cold War, it was certainly a failure—and if the United States had taken its emergence as a signal to stop competing, the result would have been dangerous for U.S. security. But neither of those things was true.

For one thing, the architects of détente always saw it as a halfway measure, a source of equilibrium and restraint but not an end to the rivalry. Nor did the United States ever stop seeking relative advantage over the Soviet Union. Adam Ulam, writing at the end of détente in 1979, noted that “it would be a mistake” to view détente “as yet another ruse and deception on the Soviets’ part.” True, they gained some advantages, including recognition as an equivalent power. Détente collapsed when Moscow saw the need to invade Afghanistan. But the United States competed vigorously during this period, and, Ulam reminds us, détente “was too readily taken by the United States as a license to meddle in the domestic affairs of the USSR.” The collapse of détente, he concludes, was brought about as much by “America’s sins of omission and commission” as by Soviet aggression.²⁸

Détente’s Effects: Not a Lifeline to Moscow

Another myth surrounding détente is that the easing of pressure it represented gifted the Soviet Union with a new lease on life and that only when Ronald Reagan arrived to end those concessions and impose unrelenting pressure on the Soviet system did it finally crack. There is no doubt that Reagan’s clarity and toughness exacerbated the uncertainties and insecurities of the men in the Kremlin. But the idea that feckless détente appeasement was helping the Soviet Union, and that Reagan’s hard pressure ended it, reflects a misunderstanding of a vastly more complex reality—the same sort of complexity the United States confronts in its relationship with China today.

Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet advocate of détente, did aim to continue strengthening the Soviet system and compete effectively with the West. But as Vladislav Zubok has argued, Brezhnev also wanted the Soviet Union to be seen as a respected European power and hoped to promote peace.²⁹ Sergei Radchenko agrees that those who saw Brezhnev as trying to fool or trap the United States “entirely misconstrue what he was trying to do. True to his heartfelt

²⁸ Ulam, “U.S.-Soviet Relations,” pp. 28, 31.

²⁹ Zubok, “The Soviet Union and Détente of the 1970s,” p. 430.

commitment to world peace, Brezhnev proclaimed that his goal was nothing short of saving civilization itself or, to be more precise, European civilization.” To make détente a reality, Brezhnev was willing to make significant concessions: He signed arms control agreements that gave up Soviet ambitions for nuclear superiority, accepted a Western status in Berlin that Khrushchev “went to the brink of war to deny,” and much else.³⁰

Nor could the process have truly helped the Soviet Union all that much. Détente and accommodations couldn’t save a bankrupt system, partly because getting access to Western technology “often failed due to problems in the Soviet state planning system.”³¹ By the late 1960s—and in particular with the pitiless intervention to quash a reformist movement in Czechoslovakia in 1968—faith in the Soviet system within Russia and the broader Soviet Union was rapidly ebbing. The idea that the Soviet system was somehow recovering during the period of détente, when in fact its ideological pretensions were evaporating, flies in the face of history.

For all these reasons, détente did the Soviet Union no favors. Zubok concludes that the easing of tensions offered hope to Soviet leaders that they could turbocharge growth with Western investment and technology, a belief that helped weaken support for the serious systemic reforms that would actually have made a difference. “In the absence of internal reforms of the Soviet economy and society,” he concludes, “its semi-opening to the outside world became a poison rather than a medicine, a corrupting and demoralizing factor.” Meantime the opening to the outside world destroyed official Soviet claims of the superiority of their system by allowing more citizens to travel and gain access to Western information and entertainment. “Détente opportunities,” Zubok explains, “exposed the Soviet people to alternative ways of life, eroded the myth of Soviet exceptionalism, and weakened the messianic chauvinism.” For a regime that claimed legitimacy largely through its role in protecting Soviet citizens against a rapacious capitalist world, moreover, tempering the ideological confrontation weakened the legitimizing effect of an irrevocable confrontation. In sum, “The [process of] détente greatly accelerated the process of inner degeneration and self-destruction of the Soviet ‘socialist’ project.”³²

Those skeptical of the value of stabilizing rivalries suggest that détente was a mistake for another reason, arguing that Ronald Reagan’s abandonment of the concept in favor of intense confrontation and pressure was what ultimately fractured the Soviet system and produced victory. The lesson of the Cold War, this perspective suggests, is that great powers seeking true success in rivalries should not attempt to coexist. They should try to undermine and destabilize their rival.

This, too, is a simplified reading of the Cold War experience. For one thing, Reagan’s approach was always a mix of pressure and offers of a transformed relationship, if the Soviet Union would begin easing some of its worst behaviors. Reagan surely took many steps to

³⁰ Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin’s Bid for Global Power*, pp. 380, 371; cf. pp. 359-391.

³¹ Radchenko, *To Run the World*, p. 374.

³² Zubok, “The Soviet Union and Détente of the 1970s,” pp. 438–444.

aggressively compete with the Soviet Union—boosting the U.S. defense budget, backing proxy forces fighting communist governments, launching rhetorical attacks on the Soviet system. At the same time, in policy terms, he pursued an equally long list of steps designed to stabilize the relationship: continuing to abide by the terms of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II), signaling greater flexibility on negotiations over missiles in Europe, lifting the grain embargo, and by 1983 sending messages to various Soviet officials that he did not mean to threaten them and hoped for a better relationship.

Most profoundly, Reagan was interested in a transformation of the rivalry into something far more peaceful—admittedly on the basis of Soviet behavioral change, but nonetheless a vision that could be described as *détente* on steroids. He persistently offered such a vision to one Soviet leader after another. And when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, while Reagan kept up the pressure (and remained totally obdurate about the Strategic Defense Initiative, which frustrated Gorbachev intensely),³³ he overruled his hawkish advisors and moved toward something far more elaborate than simple coexistence. His embrace of Gorbachev was so striking that it provoked the original authors of *détente*—Nixon and Kissinger—to condemn his naivete; they claimed that Gorbachev was “more aggressive, not less” than prior Soviet leaders.³⁴

After a decade of research into Reagan’s views and policies, Max Boot concluded that claims he adopted an extreme approach to collapsing the Soviet Union

are belied by Reagan’s record. Even as he denounced the Soviet Union in his speeches, he also sought talks with its leaders. Reagan ended Jimmy Carter’s grain embargo on the Soviet Union and only briefly imposed sanctions on the construction of a Soviet gas pipeline to Western Europe. Many on the right criticized him for not doing more in response to the imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981.³⁵

Boot concludes that “Reagan did not bring about Gorbachev’s reforms, much less force the collapse of the Soviet Union.”³⁶ Rather, the real author of the process was Gorbachev, who was

not driven to reform the Soviet Union by pressure from Reagan but, rather, by his own humane impulses. The Soviet Union in 1985, when Gorbachev took over, had an ailing economy—primarily because of a fall in global oil prices and the inefficiency of communist central planning—but it was hardly terminal. . . . The Soviet Union would break up not because it was economically bankrupt but

³³ Few, if any, U.S. administrations sought agreement for agreement’s sake. Reagan’s points of moderation, Stephen Sestanovich argues, did signal flexibility but also “underscored how uncompromising Reagan’s approach really was.” Mollifying dialogues were “immediately followed by a new burst of anti-Communist rhetoric” and a persistent and even growing “interest in exploiting Soviet vulnerability” (Sestanovich, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama*, loc 4216, 4263).

³⁴ Sestanovich, 2014, loc 4414.

³⁵ Boot, “Ronald Reagan Was More Ideological—and More Pragmatic—Than You Think.”

³⁶ Boot, “Reagan Didn’t Win the Cold War.”

because Gorbachev recognized that it was morally bankrupt, and he refused to hold it together by force.³⁷

And indeed, the very fears Reagan engendered threatened to have potentially catastrophic results—something he himself recognized, and fairly quickly. Zubok contends that the pressure components of Reagan’s approach to the Soviet Union generated a result that was “exactly the opposite from the one intended by Washington. It strengthened those in the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the security apparatus who had been pressing for a mirror-image of Reagan’s own policy.”³⁸ Meantime Soviet worries emerged in the famous 1983 war scare and related intelligence reporting and caused Reagan to worry that Moscow actually did think he was prepared to go to war. He responded with multiple actions, including letters to a succession of Soviet leaders designed to reassure them.

Yet this era also demonstrates the importance of remaining committed to core interests and values even while seeking stabilizing measures. All during this period, from the Nixon pursuit of détente through Reagan’s eventual embrace of Gorbachev, the United States remained steadfast on issues where U.S. leaders believed vital interests were at stake. The United States persisted in strong commitments to allies. In specific crises and disputes, it stood firm and even risked conflict, continuing a pattern established in earlier standoffs over Berlin, Cuba, and the status of West Germany. During the Nixon and Reagan softening periods, the United States confronted the Soviet Union during the 1973 war, made escalatory threats over Vietnam, undertook an immense military buildup, and faced down Soviet threats during the Euromissile deployment. As Stephen Sestanovich has argued, even U.S. presidents aiming to stabilize the relationship could still be determined and even uncompromising when needed.³⁹

In sum, the Cold War pursuit of détente and Reagan’s even more idealistic effort to transcend the rivalry ended up being highly beneficial for the United States—in part because it did remain steadfast on critical issues.⁴⁰ This history carries several implications for the U.S.-China rivalry. It suggests, first of all, that stabilizing even an intense bilateral rivalry is possible—if both sides believe that such a process is important or even vital to achieving larger interests. It also suggests that calming a rivalry can very much be in the U.S. interest if it helps avoid crises and conflict to allow deeper sources of national advantage play out. Arguments that détente empowered the Soviet Union and perpetuated the Cold War are unpersuasive—in fact, détente very likely hastened the crisis in the Soviet system. Stabilizing a rivalry can lay bare the more fundamental underlying dynamics, to the advantage of the side with the more sustainable, persuasive, and attractive model.

³⁷ Boot, “Ronald Reagan Was More Ideological—and More Pragmatic—Than You Think.”

³⁸ Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, p. 276.

³⁹ Sestanovich, *Maximalist*.

⁴⁰ Shulman, “Toward a Western Philosophy of Coexistence,” p. 51.

The Cold War case is unusual in that the U.S. rival actually collapsed as a political entity, which is exceedingly unlikely in the Chinese case and should not be the basis for U.S. strategy. Scenarios under which a stabilized rivalry serve U.S. interests would have to envision different endgames.⁴¹ This rivalry will not end with a comprehensive U.S. systemic victory as in the Cold War. Indeed, some observers doubt that it will end at all: The best that can be hoped for is effective competition over the long term.⁴² In either case, though—an unending competition or the prospect of transcending the rivalry—stabilizing it short of war is an essential precondition for success. That is the ultimate lesson of Cold War détente, as indeed it was the lesson of many earlier periods of great-power efforts at coexistence: Efforts to ease the most dangerous forms of competition are essential to both modest and ambitious U.S. goals in any rivalry.⁴³

An Approach to a *Modus Vivendi*: Stable Rivalries

Taking all this analysis into account, we focus on one specific condition of the U.S.-China rivalry as a potential goal: a version of coexistence involving some basic sense of a stable *modus vivendi*. This does not envision a resolution of the rivalry or even an end to vigorous, and at some points seemingly zero-sum, competition. Instead, we are focused on what an earlier RAND report termed a “stable competition”: a situation of continued and occasionally bitter rivalry, but one in which both sides recognize the need to find a way to live together in ways that avoid crises and wars as much as possible and help preserve each side’s most vital interests.⁴⁴ Drawing on that report, we offer several defining characteristics of such a situation below. But first we review the basic idea of a stable competition.

Seeking Stability in U.S.-China Relations

Many observers over the past decade have called for some form of stability, coexistence, or equilibrium in U.S.-China relations, even as the overarching rivalry persists. Zack Cooper notes that recent U.S. administrations gave up the idea of end states in the rivalry and instead

⁴¹ For a discussion of varieties of rivalry outcomes, see Mazarr, Dale-Huang, et al., *The Fates of Nations: Varieties of Success and Failure for Great Powers in Long-Term Rivalries*.

⁴² See for example Doshi, “No Exit from Rivalry: How Steady States Can Guide Strategy,” pp. 15–20.

⁴³ Doshi argues persuasively against extreme, “victory”-seeking approaches to the U.S.-China rivalry and strongly endorses what he calls “tactical reassurance,” which is important even if—indeed, *especially* if—hostility and mistrust continue at the strategic level. As he writes, “Better communication about what Washington is doing—and not doing—on issues ranging from technology to Taiwan can discourage dangerously fatalistic thinking from a paranoid great power whose dark view of the United States could get even darker. Making clear that Washington’s goals are not limitless but tied to specific interests reduces the risk of runaway escalation. That requires face-to-face meetings so that misperceptions can be ironed out quickly, competitive steps by the United States can be explained directly, and both sides can find off-ramps. Far from capitulation, this is basic diplomacy. It complements intense competition by making it less risky and more sustainable” (Doshi, “The Biden Plan”). This is essentially what we have in mind by stabilizing the rivalry.

⁴⁴ Mazarr, Charap, et al., *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*.

“embraced an approach focused on establishing a stable ‘steady state’ with China.”⁴⁵ Different assessments have used various phrases for the same basic notion, of a stable rivalry: “competitive coexistence,” for example, or “managed competition.” Hal Brands has defined the former as a situation of persistent rivalry, but one in which

Beijing would presumably pull back a bit on issues—such as Taiwan and the U.S. alliance structure in East Asia—where vital U.S. interests are at stake. The end state, whether enshrined in a formal diplomatic settlement or simply arrived at through tacit geopolitical bargaining, would be a more stable relationship in which the danger of war recedes, the United States’ key strategic interests are preserved, and areas of potential cooperation can gradually expand. ... Competitive coexistence rests on the idea that the CCP may mellow over time.⁴⁶

Henry Kissinger wrote 15 years ago about the potential scope of a U.S.-China coexistence, or even the potential for some kind of partnership to help coordinate policies on challenges in world politics. “The question,” he argued,

ultimately comes down to what the U.S. and China can realistically ask of each other. An explicit American project to organize Asia on the basis of containing China or creating a bloc of democratic states for an ideological crusade is unlikely to succeed—in part because China is an indispensable trading partner for most of its neighbors. By the same token, a Chinese attempt to exclude America from Asian economic and security affairs will similarly meet serious resistance from almost all other Asian states, which fear the consequences of a region dominated by a single power.⁴⁷

Kissinger concluded that “The appropriate label for the Sino-American relationship is less partnership than ‘co-evolution.’” By this notion he meant that “both countries pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict. Neither side endorses all the aims of the other or presumes a total identity of interests, but both sides seek to identify and develop complementary interests.”⁴⁸

Former Australian Prime Minister and notable China scholar Kevin Rudd has called for a form of “managed strategic competition.” The objective of such a program would be to operate their rivalry “within agreed-on parameters that would reduce the risk of a crisis, conflict, and war. In theory, this is possible; in practice, however, the near-complete erosion of trust between the two has radically increased the degree of difficulty.” His concept of managed competition envisions stabilizing the rivalry “by jointly crafting a limited number of rules of the road that will help prevent war. The rules will enable each side to compete vigorously across all policy and regional domains.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Cooper, “The Necessity of a Phased China Strategy,” p. 12.

⁴⁶ Brands, “How Does This End?” p. 6. Brands is describing such an outcome, not arguing that it is plausible.

⁴⁷ Kissinger, “The China Challenge.”

⁴⁸ Kissinger, “The China Challenge.”

⁴⁹ Rudd, “Short of War: How to Keep U.S.-Chinese Confrontation from Ending in Calamity.”

Rudd argued in 2021 for a specific set of mutual restraints that could achieve these goals. He suggested that

Both sides must abstain, for example, from cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure. Washington must return to strictly adhering to the “one China” policy, especially by ending the Trump administration’s provocative and unnecessary high-level visits to Taipei. For its part, Beijing must dial back its recent pattern of provocative military exercises, deployments, and maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait. In the South China Sea, Beijing must not reclaim or militarize any more islands and must commit to respecting freedom of navigation and aircraft movement without challenge; for its part, the United States and its allies could then (and only then) reduce the number of operations they carry out in the sea. Similarly, China and Japan could cut back their military deployments in the East China Sea by mutual agreement over time. If both sides could agree on those stipulations, each would have to accept that the other will still try to maximize its advantages while stopping short of breaching the limits.⁵⁰

Former Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and former National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan argued in a 2019 essay that in its relationship with China, the United States “should seek to achieve not a definitive end state akin to the Cold War’s ultimate conclusion but a steady state of clear-eyed coexistence on terms favorable to U.S. interests and values.” They recommended pursuing “favorable terms of coexistence with Beijing in four key competitive domains—military, economic, political, and global governance—thereby securing U.S. interests without triggering the kind of threat perceptions that characterized the U.S.-Soviet rivalry.”⁵¹ The upshot was a form of coexistence, though one in which the United States sought “favorable terms” in key areas.

Former senior National Security Council official Rush Doshi has described similar terms of competitive coexistence with China. “What should be more important than articulating the *end* of competition,” he has argued, “is articulating the possible *limits* of competition in a world where it continues so that there might be a chance of managing it.” Competing in tough and direct ways is not mutually exclusive with “diplomacy with China that seeks to manage competition, avoid escalation, and enhance transnational cooperation—all of which contribute to a more competitive and sustainable U.S. approach.”⁵²

That is in effect what we are investigating here: the potential for stable steady states. Critically, the approach discussed here does *not* aim at transcending the rivalry per se. Our focus,

⁵⁰ Rudd, “Short of War.”

⁵¹ Campbell and Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China.”

⁵² Doshi, “No Exit from Rivalry,” p. 19.

as defined above, is narrower: stabilizing an ongoing rivalry, but doing so in ways somewhat more ambitious and formalized than has so far occurred.⁵³

Defining Stability in a Great-Power Rivalry

It turns out that this is a surprisingly challenging concept to define. While a vast literature exists on crisis stability and instability, very little theoretical work has been done on the requirements for a stable *enduring* rivalry over years or decades, or even how to recognize such stability when it exists. A 2021 RAND study on the elements of stable rivalries suggested that “A strategically unstable relationship would be inherently escalatory and nonlinear, in which small actions would tend to produce large reactions (or, put another way, in which actions would generate overreactions). It would be a situation constantly surging away from a mean or equilibrium and perpetually risking conflict.”⁵⁴ When trying to conceptualize the elements of stability, it argued that

[T]wo factors emerged that offer a useful pair of considerations for defining the very concept of a stable rivalry. These are mutual acceptance of a shared status quo and the existence of a resilient equilibrium to which the relationship can return after perturbations. In our initial theoretical and historical review, we found these two factors to be present in all stable rivalries we examined and their absence to be a consistent hallmark of rivalries that become unstable. In subsequent chapters, we apply these factors to the cases we considered to determine whether this initial judgment was correct and conclude that, indeed, all our analysis ultimately supports these two factors as the axes around which stability revolves.⁵⁵

The study went beyond the defining elements of a stable rivalry to identifying the variables that tend to produce stability in such relationships. Drawing on historical and theoretical evidence, the report identified many such variables, summarized in Figure 1. The study assessed each of these in detail and concluded that “most now appear to be either directly tending toward destabilization of the U.S.-China rivalry or showing at least a mixed picture with growing elements of potential instability.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Former U.S. intelligence officer John Culver has defined the objective this way:

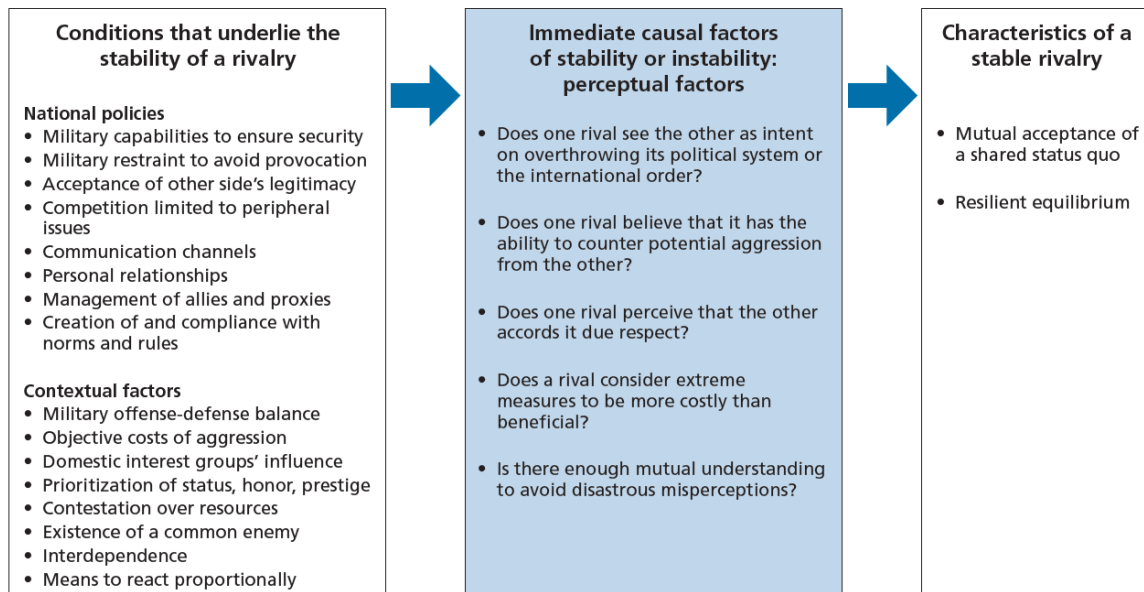
The relationship needs to move first toward a more constrained competition in which both sides stop racing toward the bottom before it can be strengthened and move toward managed competition instead of adversarial enmity. This wouldn’t mean an end to strategic rivalry between the two but would constrain its means and modes. That requires both to create complementary narratives that emphasize they have more to gain than lose from constraining the breadth and depth of their competition in economic and security affairs: that the existential urgency both sides are positing today is at least partially imagined, that a less confrontational approach is possible, and that “time is on my side.” (Culver, “Envisioning Positive U.S.-China Relations in the 2030s”)

⁵⁴ Mazarr, Charap, et al., *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Mazarr, Charap, et al., *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ See Mazarr, Charap, et al., *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*, p. xvi.

Figure 1. Variables Determining the Stability of a Strategic Rivalry



SOURCE: Reproduced from Mazarr, Charap, et al., *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*.

From these various factors, we can derive a more focused set of characteristics that might define a stable rivalry. These elements would not envision an end to the rivalry, transcending it to any sort of new relationship, or even a pause in starkly competitive behavior. We are trying to define here a more limited form of live-and-let-live arrangement—something like what emerged to a degree during the Cold War, in part but not completely defined by the period known as *détente*—that we could call a stabilized rivalry. We suggest that such a situation would have six defining characteristics:

1. Each side accepts, in ways that are deeply ingrained and broadly shared among decisionmaking officials, that some degree of *modus vivendi* must necessarily be part of the relationship, imposed by objective factors such as the nature of the international system and the existence of nuclear weapons. In the process, each side admits that the effective destruction of the other is not a feasible option.
2. Each side accepts the essential political legitimacy of the other.
3. In specific issue areas, especially those in dispute between the two sides, both work to develop sets of shared rules, norms, institutions, and other tools that create lasting conditions of a stable *modus vivendi* within that domain over a specific period (such as three to five years). This does not presume an end to strong competition, only the development of mechanisms that allow each side to believe that its most vital interests in that issue area have some protection during a defined time frame.
4. Both sides practice restraint in the development of capabilities explicitly designed to undermine the deterrent and defensive capabilities of the other in ways that would create an existential risk to its homeland.
5. Each side accepts some essential list of characteristics of a shared vision of organizing principles for world politics that can provide at least a baseline for an agreed status

quo. These could include things like a relatively open international trading system, the value of stabilizing the international financial context, the need to respect state sovereignty absent formal international consensus otherwise, the importance of developing environmental protection capabilities and mechanisms, and the need to avoid direct conflict between nuclear-armed states.

6. There are mechanisms and institutions in place—from long-term personal ties to physical communication links to agreed norms and rules of engagement for crises and risky situations—that help provide a moderating or return-to-stable-equilibrium function.

Achieving these six elements would produce a great-power relationship that has mitigating barriers preventing the most extreme instabilities and some elements of an inherent capacity to recover from crises and provocations. It would reflect the two most important elements of a stable rivalry developed in the earlier RAND study: an acceptance of some degree of a shared status quo and a resilient equilibrium.

Barriers to a Stable Competitive Environment

Fulfilling these six criteria will obviously be extremely difficult in the U.S.-China relationship, for several reasons. One has to do with mutual acceptance of legitimacy. Powerful voices on both sides argue for unqualified competition and zero-sum mentalities. The rise of such intensely suspicious and hostile attitudes can rise to the point where it questions the other side's essential legitimacy as a global actor, governing entity, or even state, violating the mutual respect for legitimacy that is so essential to stability in a rivalry.

A second barrier to stability speaks to one of the two foundational criteria for a stable competition, an agreed status quo. As Robert Jervis noted about the strong cooperative arrangement of a "security regime," the rivals "must prefer a more regulated environment to one in which all states behave individualistically. This means that all must be reasonably satisfied with the status quo and whatever alterations can be gained without resort to the use or threat of unlimited war, as compared with the risks and costs of less restrained competition."⁵⁷ It is not clear that such a situation prevails today, especially on the Chinese side: Beijing is notably dissatisfied with some elements of the international order. From a perceptual standpoint, each side views the other as revisionist and even predatory.

Third, the U.S.-China relationship is at a point at which there are insufficient communication channels and personal relationships to promote equilibrium and build a modicum of trust. This may evolve in the second Trump administration, but even after years of efforts by senior officials in the Biden administration, the numbers of reliable, trusted channels between governments remain relatively small.

Fourth, both sides in this rivalry have displayed an intense focus on prestige and reputation, one likely to generate outsized reactions to possibly minor insults and to invest secondary issues

⁵⁷ Jervis, "Security Regimes," p. 360.

with vital importance. In order for stability to prevail in a rivalry, some degree of objective pragmatism is required, as well as a willingness to suffer some short-term losses or make concessions without concern that every setback is a mortal threat.

Fifth, both China and the United States are now displaying a transactional and self-interested approach to international norms and rules. This has always been true of all great powers, and certainly of both these rivals for some time. But the trend appears to be running in the direction of a decline in the respect for and adherence to key norms and supportive participation in major international institutions. To the extent that this trend continues, it will erode some possible bases for a stable equilibrium in the rivalry.

Other, more specific barriers to stability exist in particular issue areas, such as the three that we review in Chapter 4. Taken together, they create a daunting environment for the challenge of mitigating the dangers inherent in this competition.

Conclusion: The Urgent Importance of a *Modus Vivendi*

In the depths of the later Cold War, the scholar Adam Ulam argued in 1985 that the risks of confrontation and conflict in the Cold War, and especially the “emotionalism” surrounding many issues in dispute, made it “all the more important for the American public to develop that combination of sophistication and patience, qualities which in turn enable the policymakers to combine tenacity of purpose with a flexibility of tactics—the necessary prerequisites for a viable U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union.”⁵⁸ The same basic challenge exists today, in the U.S. approach to China—the need, alongside vigorous efforts to compete and in some cases deny Chinese objectives, to discover the elements of a stabilizing *modus vivendi*.

George Kennan, writing a quarter of a century before Ulam, had an impassioned appeal for a similar agenda. He very explicitly recognized Soviet aggressiveness and hypocrisy but nonetheless argued for a mutual humility and commitment in order to achieve true coexistence. “Could we not, all of us,” Kennan asked,

now put aside the pretense of total righteousness and admit to a measure of responsibility for the tangled processes of history that have brought the world to its present dangerous state? And could we not, having once admitted this, drop the argument about whose responsibility is greatest and address ourselves at long last, earnestly and without recrimination, to the elimination of the central and most intolerable elements of the danger?⁵⁹

This, again, is our task today. At the most general level, this broad review of the nature of stability in a strategic rivalry suggests several possible elements of an agenda for pursuing that

⁵⁸ Ulam, “U.S.-Soviet Relations,” p. 32.

⁵⁹ Kennan, “Peaceful Coexistence,” p. 190.

goal.⁶⁰ These represent specific ways, in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry, to pursue the six categories of stabilization listed above:

1. *Clarify U.S. objectives in the rivalry with language that explicitly rejects absolute versions of victory and accepts the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.* The United States can lay the foundations for a process of stabilization by consistently broadcasting messages that seek that core precondition for stability: Mutual recognition of legitimacy. This will not change Chinese views of U.S. intentions, which are highly suspicious and even paranoid, in the short term. But it can nevertheless serve an important atmospheric purpose.
2. *Reestablish several trusted lines of communications between senior officials.*⁶¹ The Biden administration worked hard to create such links, allowing pairs of senior officials to communicate regularly for various purposes. These included clarifying U.S. interests and red lines, but also working to resolve disputes and avoid escalations of crises. Yet those efforts achieved only so much, and U.S.-China diplomatic channels remained limited. The Trump administration should seek to establish several overlapping lines of communication between senior officials across economic, national security, and science and technology domains.
3. *Improve crisis-management practices, links, and agreements between the two sides.*⁶² This will be challenging in part because China (and especially the People's Liberation Army [PLA]) has shown little interest in crisis management mechanisms, appearing to see them as threats to its ability to use crises for strategic effect. But there are some recent signs that Beijing has recognized the strategic risk involved in confrontational actions, such as unsafe intercepts of U.S. ships and aircraft. It is worth making another effort to establish better communications links in general and over specific issues. It may be possible to build on shifting thinking in Beijing with modest additional steps, whether formalized or private commitments, including standards for maritime crises building on the Maritime Military Consultative Agreement (MMCA) and Rules of Behavior. Initially, given limits to both sides' willingness to compromise, the goals could be limited to creating a modest baseline of understandings and standards.⁶³

⁶⁰ These proposals are derived from our assessment of the factors outlined above, and from several recent reports on the U.S.-China rivalry: Campbell and Sullivan, "Competition without Catastrophe"; Task Force on U.S.-China Policy, "Memo on U.S. Policy Toward China"; Task Force on U.S.-China Policy, *China's New Direction*, 2021; Chivvis, *U.S.-China Relations for the 2030s*; and Mazarr, *U.S.-China Relations in the Tank*.

⁶¹ On this specific issue see Culver, "The Balloon Drama Was a Drill. Here's How the US And China Can Prepare for a Real Crisis."

⁶² On this specific issue, see Swaine, "Avoiding the Abyss: An Urgent Need for Sino-U.S. Crisis Management"; Swaine, "How to Break the Impasse in U.S.-China Crisis Communication"; Morris, "China's Views on Escalation and Crisis Management and Implications for the United States"; and International Crisis Group, "Risky Competition: Strengthening U.S.-China Crisis Management."

⁶³ As one analysis suggested,

As for the Rules of Behavior, Washington and Beijing are unlikely to develop—through bilateral channels—either more detailed or legally binding rules that improve operational safety. The two parties could, however, pursue regular multilateral discussions that review compliance with existing international rules and norms more broadly, including those found in COLREGs, the

Eventually, the United States could also broach the idea of a new accord on par with the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement.

4. *Seek specific new agreements—a combination of formal public accords and private understandings—to limit the U.S.-China cyber competition.* This effort will require U.S. demands and cost-imposing steps in support of diplomacy. But as the Obama administration demonstrated in 2015, it is possible to achieve limited, temporary changes in Chinese behavior. The United States could propose a dialogue on standards for cyber conduct, beginning with the most dangerous potential actions, such as steps to actively undermine critical infrastructure short of major war.
5. *Declare mutual acceptance of strategic nuclear deterrence and a willingness to forswear technologies and doctrines that would place the other side's nuclear deterrent at risk.* China is rapidly expanding its nuclear deterrent force, with a presumed goal of reaching some sort of parity with the United States. The United States and China began a tentative strategic stability dialogue in November 2023, and a new initiative could build on that. It could begin with extremely simple and basic statements regarding nuclear use and broad commitments not to threaten the security of the other side's deterrent.
6. *Develop new Track 1.5 and Track 2 initiatives, or deepen and improve existing ones, with stronger connections to high-level decisionmakers on both sides.* The potential value of such dialogues depends to a degree on the health of the wider relationship. There is a general perception that they have had very little capacity to moderate the U.S.-China relations in recent years. But given the paucity of working-level and even senior-level contacts between the two governments, Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogue could—if both sides are willing to use them in this way—provide a partial alternative. The United States could approach China about using existing dialogues or creating new ones with the specific condition that they enjoy strong connections to senior leaders on both sides.
7. *Seek modest cooperative ventures on issues of shared interests or humanitarian concern.* Most analyses of U.S.-China relations contain the same call for cooperation on global issues, from climate change to pandemic preparedness. While the theoretical case for collaboration on such issues seems obvious, producing real shared action has been very challenging in practice, partly because of intense mistrust on both sides. For its part, the United States will need to accept that collaborative ventures will provide China with an opportunity to enhance its global role on some issues and even gain influence—but that those trends are underway anyway, and collaboration has its own benefits. Both sides could try to engage this issue with extremely modest steps, perhaps including a cooperative humanitarian endeavor in a country where both have significant investments; one or two very targeted scientific collaborations related to renewable energies; and quiet dialogues among scientific experts on future pandemic responses.

Chicago Convention, CUES and UNCLOS, and, through that process, reduce the ambiguity surrounding terms and definitions. Raising these issues in multilateral channels could help depoliticize discussions and has the potential to appeal to Beijing's regional interests. (International Crisis Group, "Risky Competition," p. 26)

Beyond these very broad stabilizing measures, we investigated three areas of very urgent competition: Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the burgeoning U.S.-China competition in science and technology. In each, we assessed U.S. and Chinese interests and goals and attempted to discover possible elements of a stable equilibrium, at least in the medium term—roughly the next five to seven years. In the next two chapters, we summarize the findings of that analysis.

3. Can the CCP Coexist with the United States?

As we noted in Chapter 1, some observers have argued that any form of *modus vivendi* with an aggressive revisionist constitutes a form of appeasement and is ultimately dangerous. Speaking in terms of coexistence, they contend, only signals weakness to regimes that have no interest in anything but strategic hegemony. The only proper approach to such predatory states is to undermine their power and seek to eventually bring a less adventurist and ideologically irreconcilable governing system to power.

Some observers have made the same argument about China today: that aiming for any semi-formalized condition of coexistence—even signaling a desire for better relations—can show weakness and encourage Chinese adventurism. In this view, the United States should seek “victory,” not *détente*, and do so in part by weakening the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimacy⁶⁴—in large part because the CCP stands in irreconcilable conflict with the United States, its interests, and its values. Some versions of this viewpoint can be extreme. More thoughtful and moderate versions of these arguments have been made by prominent scholars of China, especially over the past few years. Rush Doshi’s *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* describes a phased grand strategy to displace the U.S.-led order: initially focused on “blunting” American power in Asia, then “building” regional hegemony, and now expanding globally to construct a China-led order. Doshi argues that shifts in strategy align with China’s perception of U.S. power and threat.⁶⁵ Nadège Rolland’s monograph *Mapping China’s Strategic Space* argues that China’s foreign policy is rooted in hegemonic aspirations and shaped by classical geopolitics. Rolland highlights the CCP’s desire for a steadily expanding realm of geopolitical dominance as an inevitable result of growing power and persistent fear of foreign containment.⁶⁶ Kevin Rudd’s *On Xi Jinping: How Xi’s Marxist Nationalism Is Shaping China and the World* emphasizes ideology as the linchpin of President Xi Jinping’s governance. Under Xi, nationalism and grievance toward the West have intensified, legitimizing assertive foreign policies and projecting a vision of global leadership rooted in civilizational centrality.⁶⁷ Finally, Matthew Pottinger’s congressional testimonies and co-written essays point to “secret” speeches and sources to claim that Xi’s ideology conveys “above all, confidence in the ultimate victory of communism over the capitalist west” with an

⁶⁴ Gallagher and Pottinger, “No Substitute for Victory”; Matthew Kroenig and Dan Negrea, “Against China, the United States Must Play to Win”; Kroenig and Negrea, *We Win They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy and the New Cold War*.

⁶⁵ Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*.

⁶⁶ Rolland, *Mapping China’s Strategic Space*.

⁶⁷ Rudd, *On Xi Jinping: How Xi’s Marxist Nationalism Is Shaping China and the World*.

end state that requires remaking global governance and to replace the modern nation-state system with “a new order featuring Beijing at its pinnacle.”⁶⁸

While certain segments of American academia and policy communities have historically held a particularly adverse view of China, what is noteworthy about these scholars is their proficiency in Mandarin and their status as respected authorities on China, which lends credibility to their sourcing and arguments. Each of these writers uses Chinese-language sources, such as Xi Jinping speeches, official documents, and writings of Chinese strategists, to make their arguments. That said, their analyses sometimes rely on a narrow subset of sources and take these sources out of context. Moreover, some of these assessments may be informed by Western political science frameworks, which, while methodologically rigorous, can risk overlooking historical legacies, cultural framing, and the often ambiguous or performative nature of Chinese political discourse.

Theories of China’s true ambitions obviously carry powerful implications for the possibility of stabilizing the rivalry. If the CCP is engaged in an unqualified effort to destroy American power and establish geopolitical primacy around the world, there would be no space for anything like a stable equilibrium. Chinese efforts to damage U.S. interests and destabilize existing norms and institutions would rapidly undermine any effort at stability.

Of course, even a great power pursuing an aggressive long-term revisionist campaign can agree to temporary truces and agreements when they are in their interest. This was partly the story of *détente*. Soviet leaders had not given up on the ostensible goals of Marxist-Leninist ideology, which continued to expect and call for the collapse of Western capitalism. Soviet investments in defense continued, and some international adventures picked up pace in the 1970s. Despite this, Moscow agreed to—and placed real importance on—a series of measures designed to reduce the intensity of the contest.

Even a fairly alarmist interpretation of Chinese goals, therefore, could still leave room for some degree of stabilization. This is Doshi’s view. In response to the argument by Michael Gallagher and Matthew Pottinger that any sort of accords with China are a mistake, Doshi has argued that

Washington should have greater confidence in what can be called “tactical reassurance” that addresses specific issues. Better communication about what Washington is doing—and not doing—on issues ranging from technology to Taiwan can discourage dangerously fatalistic thinking from a paranoid great power whose dark view of the United States could get even darker. Making clear that Washington’s goals are not limitless but tied to specific interests reduces the risk of runaway escalation.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith, “Xi Jinping in His Own Words: What China’s Leader Wants—and How to Stop Him from Getting It.”

⁶⁹ Doshi, “The Biden Plan.”

Rudd, too, is worried about a dangerous escalation of the rivalry and suggests measures to ease its intensity to some degree. In some ways, then, key elements of our own argument are largely consistent with their conception of the role of stabilization in the rivalry.⁷⁰

Yet Doshi, Pottinger, Rudd, and Rolland have cited Chinese-language sources to highlight the elaborate, highly aggressive character of China's goals. Their work has fueled an increasingly common view that China has well-established, specific, and uncompromising intentions that make almost any form of effort to create a meaningful equilibrium on specific issues pointless. If the most negative version of these theories is correct, then a serious agenda to stabilize the rivalry may have little place in U.S. strategy.⁷¹

In this chapter, therefore, we examine the Chinese sources cited by these authors to assess whether there is potential for meaningful stabilization of key issues of dispute with China. In addition, we contextualize this analysis by providing an overview of China's official long-standing rhetoric and initiatives related to the principle of peaceful coexistence. To be clear, this is not a defense of Chinese official statements or an attempt to find benign meaning where there is none. This chapter does not dispute that Chinese leaders have, for decades, harbored extremely paranoid views of U.S. intentions, or that China's foreign policy has grown more confident and assertive—especially since Xi Jinping assumed power, though the trend began during the latter years of Hu Jintao's leadership.⁷² Nor does it deny that China seeks to enhance its regional and global influence at America's expense. The key question is the extent to which available official Chinese statements and documents reveal expansive and secretive plans for regional and global dominance—in specific forms and on specific timetables—that would effectively rule out the potential for any equilibrium.

We find that the evidence on this point is more mixed than sometimes portrayed. There are equally plausible interpretations of primary sources, informed by subtleties in translation and a broader emphasis on context, that suggest significant ambiguity and potential flexibility in the details of Chinese ambitions. Sometimes statements are perceived as clear reflections of consensus views when in fact they are part of debates or discussions within Chinese policy contexts. Our argument is ultimately one of degree: China presents threats and challenges for the United States and other countries, but our analysis of Chinese documents and statements suggests that Beijing retains the ability to pursue its long-term goals in ways that leave significant room for short-term stabilization—and even for longer-term, more significant revisions in its degree of aggressiveness.

⁷⁰ When Doshi is critical, for example, of “strategies that seek to accommodate or reassure China, perhaps through a grand bargain or through ‘cooperation spirals’” (Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 298; cf. pp. 303–310), we read that as a rejection of more-ambitious efforts to begin transcending the rivalry. We agree that those are not plausible for the foreseeable future.

⁷¹ As we have noted, neither Doshi nor Rudd support such extreme negative interpretations.

⁷² Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?”

Interpreting Strategic Phrases: Debates on Chinese Leadership Rhetoric

In this section, we examine the debates around the meanings of three important phrases used by Chinese leaders: “hide your strength and bide your time” (*taoguang yanghui*; 韬光养晦); “actively accomplish something (*jiji yousuo zuowei*; 积极有所作为); and “world-class military” (*jianshe shijie yiliu jundui*; 建设世界一流军队).

“Hide Your Strength and Bide Your Time” or *Taoguang Yanghui* (韬光养晦)

Doshi argues that the idiom *taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦) is a grand strategic principle guiding China’s approach to the United States, given its constant presence in Chinese leader-level rhetoric and commentary.⁷³ Doshi contends that this phrase, often translated as “hide your strength, bide your time,” represents a coherent strategy to blunt U.S. military, political, and economic influence while enhancing China’s own freedom to maneuver.⁷⁴ For context, Deng Xiaoping began to use this idiom in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period marked by the fallout from the Tiananmen Square crackdown, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the imperative of economic reform.⁷⁵ The term continued to gain prominence as Deng sought to reassure both domestic and international audiences that China would adopt a restrained foreign policy, avoiding confrontation while prioritizing internal stability and development.

Yet scholars have long appreciated a broader and more general understanding of *taoguang yanghui* as a concept focusing on enabling stable domestic development during a sensitive period for China. This sensitivity was shaped in large part by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rapid changes sweeping Eastern Europe, which Deng interpreted as a warning about ideological rigidity, systemic vulnerability, and international pressure.⁷⁶ According to Michael D. Swaine’s research, many Chinese analysts view the term as a diplomatic—not military—admonition for modesty and risk avoidance to secure space for domestic priorities.⁷⁷ The concept is generally understood as a caution for China to adopt a modest, low-profile approach internationally, securing limited gains while avoiding actions that could provoke suspicion or undermine its focus on domestic development—not necessarily one that implies sinister efforts to hide dangerous ambitions.⁷⁸ Similarly, Zhou Wenxing of Nanjing University defines the concept as a

⁷³ Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 48.

⁷⁴ Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 48.

⁷⁵ Pang, *From Tao Guang Yang Hui to Xin Xing: China’s Complex Foreign Policy Transformation and Southeast Asia*, pp. 1–26.

⁷⁶ Wu and Gao, “Deng Xiaoping and China’s Guiding Principles in the Formation of a New World Order.”

⁷⁷ Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China,” p. 7.

⁷⁸ Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China,” p. 7.

broad policy declaration that lacks an operational road map.⁷⁹ He contends that a more accurate translation of the term would simply be “keeping a low profile,” which better reflects the historical and political conditions under which the term emerged.⁸⁰ His analysis aligns with broader research on CCP decisionmaking, which finds that party slogans are often deliberately vague, serving as flexible guiding principles rather than rigid strategies.⁸¹ In sum, the association of *taoguang yanghui* with survival rather than offensive ambition suggests that the concept can reflect more of a pragmatic response to vulnerability rather than a calculated strategy to obscure power as part of a grand scheme to supplant the United States. Like many phrases found in Chinese official statements and documents, it embodies a significant degree of ambiguity.

“Actively Accomplish Something” (jiji yousuo zuowei; 积极有所作为)

Doshi argues that Hu Jintao departed from *taoguang yanghui* and introduced the need for China to “actively accomplish something” (*jiji yousuo zuowei*; 积极有所作为) in order to shift the country’s strategic posture vis-à-vis the United States from soft to hard.⁸² He argues that this shift was catalyzed by the Global Financial Crisis and translated into policy during Hu’s speech at the 11th Conference of Chinese Ambassadors in 2009.⁸³ The speech, in which Hu urges officials to “actively accomplish something,” is singled out by Doshi as the tipping point that shifts Chinese foreign policy from a defensive posture to an assertive, order-building one.⁸⁴

While it is true that the Global Financial Crisis reinforced a sense among Chinese policymakers that the Western-led economic system was in decline, several scholars contest the notion that Hu’s semantic shift marked a veritable turning point toward a more assertive grand strategy. Prominent China observer Bonnie Glaser argues that the 2009 conference reflected an “adjustment” (*tiaozheng*; 调整) rather than a transformative shift.⁸⁵ Hu intended for China to undertake a more proactive but selective engagement in global affairs, rather than a full-fledged effort to displace the U.S.-led order. Alastair Iain Johnston also challenges the view that Chinese foreign policy became more aggressive after the financial crisis, emphasizing that patterns of assertiveness predate 2008 and that Beijing’s actions remained largely consistent with past behavior.⁸⁶ Similarly, Björn Jerdén finds no clear evidence that China’s diplomatic or military

⁷⁹ Zhou, “China’s ‘Grand Strategy’ as Imagined Under American Hegemony” [“美国霸权想象下的中国 ‘大战略’”].

⁸⁰ Xuetong, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement.”

⁸¹ Jakobson and Manuel, “How Are Foreign Policy Decisions Made in China?”

⁸² Emphasis added because the addition of the word *actively* to one part of Deng Xiaoping’s doctrine is singled out by Doshi as “momentous” (Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 12).

⁸³ Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 160.

⁸⁴ Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 175.

⁸⁵ Glaser, “China’s 11th Ambassadorial Conference Signals Continuity and Change in Foreign Policy.”

⁸⁶ Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?”

policies underwent a decisive transformation toward assertiveness at this time.⁸⁷ For these scholars, while Chinese leaders may have perceived a shifting balance of power, the available evidence suggests continuity rather than rupture in China's strategic trajectory in the 2010s. Moreover, it is important to note that both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were protégés of Deng Xiaoping, and their legitimacy in large part stemmed from Deng and his legacy. Subtle rhetorical shifts, such as the call to “actively accomplish something,” were typically framed as efforts to continue and develop Deng-era principles, not to replace them.⁸⁸

“World-Class Military” (jianshe shijie yiliu jundui; 建设世界一流军队)

Doshi argues that Xi's statement to build a “world-class military” (*jianshe shijie yiliu jundui*; 建设世界一流军队) during his 19th Party Congress signaled China's intention to build a military capable of global power projection. He argues that the phrase reflects China's goal to enhance its military presence beyond East Asia, positioning the PLA as a competitor to the United States.⁸⁹

Our review of available evidence suggests that this phrase is primarily viewed by PLA experts as a broad guideline for the PLA's modernization efforts rather than indicating a concrete global military strategy or ambition. During this period, China had already been undergoing extensive military reforms aimed at enhancing the PLA's capabilities, with a focus on technological advancement, force restructuring, and operational efficiency. Beginning in 2015, Xi launched a sweeping reorganization of the PLA, consolidating the military's command structure and reducing the role of ground forces in favor of naval and air capabilities.⁹⁰ While the 2015 defense white paper reaffirmed China's adherence to the long-standing strategic concept of active defense, it also expanded and updated the doctrine to address new security challenges, including maritime threats and informationized warfare.⁹¹ This evolution reflected a deepening and modernization of the strategy—not a departure from it.⁹²

Additionally, China's military modernization efforts align with broader trends among major powers seeking to integrate advanced technologies, such as AI, cyber warfare, and missile defense, into their defense strategies. Taylor Fravel observes that the phrase does not specify the operational purposes or strategic objectives for a “world-class” or modernized PLA, nor does it

⁸⁷ Jerdén, “The Assertive China Narrative.”

⁸⁸ Special thanks to one of our anonymous reviewers for this point.

⁸⁹ Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 292.

⁹⁰ Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*; Tosi, “Xi Jinping's PLA Reforms and Redefining ‘Active Defense’”; Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army,” 2019.

⁹¹ Xiong and Niu, “Adhere to the Strategic Thinking of Active Defense and Enrich and Improve the Connotation of the Times,” 2019.

⁹² Feng, “Experts Interpret the National Defense White Paper.”

imply a global military role.⁹³ Fravel emphasizes that it also lacks a clear geographic focus, offering a general vision for military development without describing a specific global posture or ambition.⁹⁴ Ultimately, the term could be understood as an aspiration for modernization rather than a pursuit of global military dominance, and does not define precisely the nature of Chinese military ambitions.

Questionable Extrapolation of Externally Focused Insights from Internally Focused Documents and Concepts

Some China scholars interpret internal CCP documents as powerful and dangerous signals to foreign audiences, overshadowing their primary function as instruments for domestic political consolidation. For example, Rudd interprets the 2013 “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere”—commonly known as Document Number 9—as the start of a new ideological campaign against liberal democratic principles. Rudd argues that the document “formed the ideological headwaters of the ‘wolf warrior’ era of diplomacy” and “directly informs the new levels of Chinese political activism and assertiveness in UN deliberative bodies.”⁹⁵ The document, according to Rudd, marks the beginning of a “decade-long ideological assault on the United States.”⁹⁶

Document Number 9, however, is more accurately understood as a continuation of long-standing CCP efforts for internal ideological discipline rather than an outward-facing manifesto against the West. The document warns against the influence of ideas that could threaten the CCP’s political control, such as Western constitutional democracy, “universal values,” civil society, neoliberalism, and press freedoms.⁹⁷ Notably, while it critiques Western ideologies and acknowledges their external origins, the document does not directly mention the United States or frame its ideological struggle in terms of an international confrontation. Instead, it presents these ideas as internal threats to China’s governance and stability, emphasizing the need to strengthen ideological management and ensure the Party’s leadership over all spheres of society. Document Number 9 is thus primarily a directive aimed at preserving CCP rule rather than a declaration of ideological war against liberal democracies.

Additionally, Document Number 9 fits within a long tradition of CCP leaders emphasizing Western ideological threats to the Party’s authority and should not be understood as a sudden turn against the West. Deng Xiaoping, for example, also warned against Western political ideas, particularly in the wake of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, during which Deng

⁹³ Fravel, “China’s ‘World Class Military’ Ambitions,” p. 91.

⁹⁴ Fravel, “China’s ‘World Class Military’ Ambitions,” p. 92.

⁹⁵ Rudd, *On Xi Jinping*, pp. 204 and 284.

⁹⁶ Rudd, *On Xi Jinping*, p. 368.

⁹⁷ “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere” [“关于当前意识形态领域情况的通报”].

denounced such concepts as democracy and press freedom.⁹⁸ The 1990s “Patriotic Education Campaign” later emphasized China’s historical humiliations by the West and was intended to foster nationalism and counter foreign political influences.⁹⁹ Even Jiang Zemin, who is seen as more tolerant of ideological diversity, tightened ideological controls over religion and civil society following the Falun Gong crackdown in 1999.¹⁰⁰

Document Number 9 therefore builds on long-standing concerns about ideological threats and is best understood within the broader continuity of CCP traditions. Like those earlier statements, it does reflect long-standing CCP suspicions of U.S. intentions and a hostile attitude toward American influence, which clearly limit the scope for general systemic coexistence. But this document does not necessarily mark a radical departure from past approaches to ideological control and political discourse.

Omitting Surrounding Context for Interpretation

While some Chinese statements may seem threatening in the abstract, the contexts in which they appear provide important evidence of their real meanings. For example, Rolland cites the infamous remark by Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi that “China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that’s a fact.” Rolland takes from this the conclusion that “great powers have far-reaching interests and need a greater space; to paraphrase Yang Jiechi, ‘that’s a fact.’”¹⁰¹ There can be little question that Chinese coercive behavior toward smaller countries, from Southeast Asia to Europe, reflects some degree of this belief.

However, Rolland omits the full context in which Yang Jiechi spoke these words at the 2010 ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Regional Forum. At this meeting, the United States unveiled a policy rejecting China’s claims to sovereignty to the South China Sea as it and 11 other nations raised the topic at the annual security forum at the meeting. According to reporting by the *Washington Post*, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi “reacted by leaving the meeting for an hour” and then returned and gave a “rambling 30-minute response in which he accused the United States of plotting against China on this issue,” “poked fun at Vietnam’s socialist

⁹⁸ On June 9, 1989, Deng delivered a speech on the Tiananmen Square protests in which he denounced “bad influences from the West” (Deng , “Speech at the Reception of Military and Above Officers of the Capital’s Martial Law Troops in 1989” [“1989 年在接见首都戒严部队军以上干部时的讲话”]).

⁹⁹ On May 3, 1990, Jiang Zemin warned that “hostile forces at home and abroad attempt to subvert China’s socialist system” (Jiang, “Patriotism and the Mission of Chinese Intellectuals” [“爱国主义和我国知识分子的使命”]; Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*).

¹⁰⁰ The CPC Central Committee issued a notice on July 19, 1999, prohibiting Communist Party members from practicing Falun Dafa, emphasizing its ideological opposition to Marxism, mandating educational campaigns, and outlining disciplinary measures for non-compliance (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, “Notice from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Prohibiting Communist Party Members from Practicing Falun Dafa” [“中共中央关于共产党员不准修炼‘法轮大法’的通知”]).

¹⁰¹ Rolland, 2024, p. 50.

credentials,” and “apparently threatened Singapore.”¹⁰² It was in this context that he allegedly said, staring directly at Singapore’s foreign minister, “China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that’s a fact.” A few days later, Yang issued a statement that appeared to stand China’s ground while attempting to smooth things over with ASEAN countries, stating there was no need to “internationalize the issue” and that China was still intent on solving the disputes bilaterally and that China’s view represented the interests of “fellow Asians.”¹⁰³

Rather than articulating a deliberate geopolitical doctrine in a premeditated speech, Yang’s words were clearly an angry response to the United States and ASEAN countries appearing to collectively push back against China’s actions in the South China Sea (as justified as that pushback may have been).¹⁰⁴ His comments did not present a proactive blueprint for expansion. Yang’s words are very likely a glimpse into how some Chinese officials truly see China’s place in international affairs. However, Rolland does not offer a logical rationale that connects how Yang’s statement about China being a big country leads to broader assertions about China’s strategic need for strategic space. Of note, there are other explanations for Yang’s harsh words. He may have sought to perform political correctness on the South China Sea issue to Beijing during this meeting. His remarks have also been characterized as the beginning of a shift underway for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to adopt tougher language on foreign policy issues since it had been criticized since the post-Tiananmen era for being too weak and compromising.¹⁰⁵

Exploring Alternative Translations of Chinese Terminology

Several of the authors have also translated Chinese terms with more hawkish English alternatives than the original Chinese language sources may imply. We give four examples of such translations and interpretations in this section a reference to using “tools of dictatorship”; the difference between “sharp” and “violent” struggle with the West; the subtle differences in translating Chinese terms into “offensive” in English; and the use of the translation “magic weapon.”

Translating “Instruments to Exert Power” as “Tools of Dictatorship”

In the *Foreign Affairs* article by Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith, the authors highlight the term “tools of dictatorship” when citing a 2012 speech by Xi Jinping discussing the collapse of the Soviet Union: “A few people tried to save the Soviet Union. . . . They seized Gorbachev but within days it was turned around again because they didn’t have the tools of dictatorship. Nobody was man enough to stand up and resist.” Pottinger et al. state that the “tools of

¹⁰² Pomfret, “U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone with China.”

¹⁰³ Pomfret, “U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone with China.”

¹⁰⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, “China’s Maritime Disputes, 1895–2024.”

¹⁰⁵ Palmer, “The Man Behind China’s Aggressive New Voice.”

dictatorship”—the “idea that it is essential for the party and especially its top leader to control the military, the security apparatus, propaganda, government data, ideology, and the economy”—would “recur again and again” in Xi’s speeches and official guidance over the next decade.¹⁰⁶ They present this example in their article as part of a larger argument that Chinese primary sources reveal that the broader Chinese regime and Xi hold “a deep fear of subversion, hostility toward the United States, sympathy with Russia, a desire to unify mainland China and Taiwan, and, above all, confidence in the ultimate victory of communism over the capitalist West.”¹⁰⁷

Here the authors translate the Chinese term *zhuanzheng gongju* (专政工具) as “tools of dictatorship,” emphasizing a focus on authoritarian control as a cornerstone of Xi’s leadership.¹⁰⁸ At the most basic level of textual analysis, the Chinese characters do not contain the word for dictatorship (*ducai*; 独裁). The first character *zhuan* in this context means “centralized,” the second character *zheng* means governance, and *gongju* means tools. But “centralized governance tools” does not make sense in English, so this translation would need to take into consideration the context. An alternative translation based on the context of the statement is “tools of executive power and control.”

In the original speech, Xi identifies Gorbachev’s loss of control over military affairs and the core functions of government as the primary reasons for the Soviet Union’s dissolution.¹⁰⁹ Xi emphasizes the importance of maintaining effective control over government and military institutions to ensure that the party’s leadership remains central and unchallenged. The reference to Gorbachev’s loss of control is intended as a cautionary tale about the dangers of losing grip on these fundamental tools of executive power and control, rather than an explicit endorsement of dictatorship as a form of governance.¹¹⁰ Moreover, when this statement was first leaked in 2013, a native Chinese speaker had already translated this term into English as “instruments to exert power.”¹¹¹

While we do not deny that the Chinese political system exhibits many characteristics associated with dictatorship,¹¹² such as centralized control and the suppression of dissent, the

¹⁰⁶ Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith, “Xi Jinping in His Own Words.”

¹⁰⁷ Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith, “Xi Jinping in His Own Words.”

¹⁰⁸ Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith, “Xi Jinping in His Own Words,” p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ Gao Yu, “Beijing Observation: Xi Jinping the Man” [“北京观察 男儿习近平”].

¹¹⁰ Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith, “Xi Jinping in His Own Words,” p. 5.

¹¹¹ “Beijing Observation: Xi Jinping the Man, by Gao Yu” (English translation by Yaxue Cao).

¹¹² We also see *zhuanzheng* often translated as dictatorship in the phrase *renmin minzhu zhuanzheng* (“人民民主专政”), which is commonly translated as “people’s democratic dictatorship.” This concept that has been enshrined in China’s constitution since its inception, reflecting the idea of the Party ruling on behalf of the majority of people. This phrase is also about domestic governance. See Mao, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship: In Commemoration of the Twenty-Eighth Anniversary of the Communist Party of China”; Research Office of the General Office of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, comp., “Mao Zedong on the NPC System”; and Mao, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship.”

focus here is on translating a phrase in a way that more accurately represents the meaning of the speaker. Xi is not declaring himself a dictator in this statement or someone who uses the tools of dictatorship;¹¹³ rather the emphasis is on maintaining control because there is an implied concern that what happened to the Soviet Union could happen to China. When choosing a more precise translation, it removes a charged term like “dictator” and helps to place the focus on the meaning of the speaker, which despite being cast in a form of machismo, reveals an insecurity that Xi has. It shifts the focus from ideological labeling to the practical concern of governance.

Subtly Attributing Violence to Xi Jinping’s Use of the Term “Sharp”

In another example of an interpretation that favors a more negative view of China, Pottinger et al. claim that a PLA textbook interprets Xi’s use of the term “sharp” to mean violent. In a 2012 speech, Xi claims “that our struggle and contest with Western countries is irreconcilable, so it will inevitably be long, complicated, and sometimes even very sharp.”¹¹⁴ In their analysis, Pottinger et al. suggest that because this quotation from Xi is followed by a statement asserting that using “war to protect our national interests is not in contradiction with peaceful development,” that the textbook authors interpreted Xi Jinping’s use of “very sharp” to mean “violent.”

Pottinger et al. not only make assumptions about the intentions of the textbook authors, but more importantly, by asserting that “very sharp” means “violent” in a secondary source quoting Xi, they are imposing this interpretation back onto the primary source. The primary source is a speech delivered by Xi in December 2012, shortly after he was elected as General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission.¹¹⁵ The particular passage cited by Pottinger et al. is part of a broader discussion on ideological and political competition, in which Xi warns against Western efforts to undermine China’s socialist system through “westernization,” “division,” and “political plots.”¹¹⁶ Rather than advocating for military confrontation, Xi goes on to urge Chinese officials to adopt greater “vigilance,” “clarity,” and “determination” to counter ideological threats.¹¹⁷

As this context makes clear, Xi’s reference to a “struggle and contest with Western countries” is confined to ideological confrontation, not a military conflict. Nowhere in the speech does he advocate for a violent response to perceived Western subversion efforts. Instead, his language remains vague, emphasizing a shift in attitude rather than a call to arms. Interpreting

¹¹³ Also, the term *dictator* in Chinese carries a very negative connotation, and people do not typically use it to describe themselves, even if they are indeed dictators.

¹¹⁴ Liang, “August 1st Army Day Review: Three Things Xi Jinping’s Old Leaders Taught Him About Military Management” [“八一建军节回顾习近平治军 老领导曾叮嘱习近平的三件事”].

¹¹⁵ Li, “Xi Jinping.”

¹¹⁶ Liang, “August 1st Army Day Review.”

¹¹⁷ Liang, “August 1st Army Day Review.”

the term “sharp” as synonymous with “violent” overlooks the abstract ideological framing of the speech and its inherently defensive tone. Moreover, from a language standpoint, the term here used by Xi in Chinese for “sharp,” *jianrui* (尖锐), does not imply violence. This term can be used to describe a sharp sound or a sharp object, such as a knife. Jumping to violence from sharpness would be akin to saying that because a knife is sharp, it will be used in a violent way. A synonym that might better fit the context would be “intense” or “pointed.”

We do not deny that Xi has referred to the danger of conflict in other statements and that it is evident that China is preparing to account for the risk of war. Our argument focuses on the intentions and preferences reflected in Chinese statements once contextualized. In this case, we believe that this particular phrase does not imply an expectation or desire for a violent clash with the United States.

Chinese References to “Offensive” Actions

Translations can significantly influence how political rhetoric is interpreted. Another example is Doshi’s translation of the phrase *xianshouqi* (先手棋) used by Hu Jintao during a speech at the 11th Conference of Chinese Ambassadors in 2009 to assert that Hu said that China should “make more offensive moves.” Doshi cites this term as evidence that China shifted toward a more assertive, order-building grand strategy.¹¹⁸

In the context of the speech, Doshi’s translation “offensive moves” does not quite capture the full meaning of this term. *Xianshou* in Chinese literally translates as “first hand” and in a game of chess (*qi*; 棋), it is used to characterize the player in the offensive position, which is typically the player that has the first move. The player with the first move can be proactive and create advantages, which are the meanings at the core of *xianshouqi*. In Hu’s speech, this term appears as he calls for China to take a more proactive place in the world.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 180.

¹¹⁹ An English translation of the full paragraph this occurs in accompanied by the Chinese translation is as follows (Hu, *Hu Jintao Selected Works* [胡锦涛文选], Vol. 3 [第三卷], p. 237):

At the same time, we should proceed with a strategic and global perspective, assess the situation, make careful plans, strive to do more in international affairs, assume international responsibilities and obligations commensurate with our national strength and status, and play a unique constructive role. As our country’s comprehensive national power and international status continue to improve, our country’s national interests continue to extend overseas, we are objectively required to enhance our diplomatic initiative, correctly distinguish and comprehensively grasp core interests, important interests, general interests, strive to safeguard and develop national interests, and strive to promote world peace and development. We must participate more actively in the formulation of international rules, promote more actively the reform of the international economic and financial system, safeguard more actively the interests of the vast number of developing countries, promote more actively the resolution of international and regional hotspot issues related to our country’s core and important interests, and promote more actively the development of the international political and economic order towards a more just and rational direction. On issues involving our country’s core interests, we should strengthen strategic

Thus, in this context, a more precise translation would be “preemptive moves” or “taking the initiative”—phrasing that conveys strategic foresight rather than outright assertiveness. This is consistent with Hu’s remarks advocating for a more active role in defending China’s interests. Recent speeches by Xi Jinping reinforce this usage, especially in the context of science and technology innovation, where he repeatedly refers to *xianshouqi* as a means of “seizing initiative” and “gaining the upper hand.”¹²⁰ To be clear, China has adopted a more assertive role in global affairs over the past decade, and this shift is indisputable. However, this general trend could reflect several different long-term intentions and objectives, some more adventuristic than others.

Translating Fabao (法宝) as “Magic Weapon”

In a 2023 congressional testimony and a 2020 speech delivered in Chinese as the Deputy National Security Advisor, Pottinger translates the term *fabao* (法宝) as “magic weapon.”¹²¹ Pottinger portrays the CCP’s use of the term as an emblem of the Party’s deceptive and expansive influence operations, particularly through its United Front Work Department (UFWD).¹²² He argues that the CCP’s reliance on the UFWD as a *fabao* demonstrates a long-standing strategy of infiltration, psychological manipulation, and covert influence. He presents the UFWD as a uniquely insidious tool with no democratic analogue.¹²³ Pottinger’s claim aligns with aspects of CCP rhetoric (Xi and previous leaders have indeed described the UFWD as a *fabao*), and the UFWD certainly engages in influence operations; however, the historical and linguistic context of the term complicates his translation to “magic weapon.”

planning, take more preemptive moves, and actively guide the situation towards a direction favorable to us. We must persevere with concrete analysis of specific issues, act according to our capabilities, follow the trend, and achieve an organic unity of firm principles and flexible strategies.

[同时,我们要从战略高度和全局角度出发,审时度势,精心运筹,争取在国际事务中有更大作为,承担与我国国力和地位相适应的国际责任和义务,发挥我国独特的建设性作用。随着我国综合国力和国际地位不断提升,我国国家利益不断向海外延伸,客观上要求我们增强外交工作主动性,正确区分和全面把握核心利益、重要利益、一般利益,着力维护和发展国家利益,着力促进世界和平与发展。我们要更加积极地参与国际规则制定,更加积极地推动国际经济金融体系改革,更加积极地维护广大发展中国家利益,更加积极地推动解决关系我国核心利益和重要利益的国际和地区热点问题,更加积极地推动国际政治经济秩序朝着更加公正合理的方向发展。在涉及我国核心利益的问题上,我们要加强战略运筹,多下先手棋,积极引导形势朝着于我有利的方向发展。要坚持具体问题具体分析,量力而行,顺势而为,做到原则坚定性和策略灵活性有机统一。]

¹²⁰ Xu, “Xi Jinping’s Reform Methodology.”

¹²¹ Pottinger, “Congressional Testimony: House Select Committee on Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party”; Pottinger, “Remarks by Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger to London-Based Policy Exchange.”

¹²² Pottinger, “Remarks by Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger to London-Based Policy Exchange.”

¹²³ Pottinger, “Remarks by Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger to London-Based Policy Exchange.”

The characters for *fabao* literally mean “magic treasure,” with *fa* (法) meaning “magic” and *bao* (宝) meaning “treasure.” The characters for “weapon” (*wuqi*; 武器) are not in this phrase. Rooted in Buddhist lore, *fabao* refers to a tool so effective it seems magical; in fiction, it often literally denotes a magical object. This term appears in a variety of fictional stories to describe special items a character might have at its disposal, which can range from the famous “golden cudgel” of the monkey king in *Journey to the West* to a “door to anywhere” in the case of popular Japanese cartoon character Doraemon. A magic weapon like the golden cudgel could be a type of *fabao*, but *fabao* itself is a more general term.

In 1939, Mao used the term *fabao* in a political context to describe three key revolutionary strategies: the United Front, armed struggle, and Party building.¹²⁴ Over time, successive CCP leaders have used the concept as well. For example, Xi has characterized Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening up” (改革开放) policy as an “important *fabao*” for China’s development.¹²⁵ Scholars within China have also labeled “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” as a *fabao*.¹²⁶ With these contexts in mind, *fabao* is best understood as denoting an essential, effective method or tool for achieving the CCP’s goals. To clarify, United Front activities raise valid concerns. However, focusing on the translation of *fabao* as “magic weapon” diverts attention from the key issue: The CCP uses *fabao* to refer to something that is highly valued and prioritized for its effectiveness or potential effectiveness. Understanding this term offers valuable insight into the CCP’s mindset, even without the added layer of it being a “weapon.”

The Background and Context of Source Documents

Some authors draw particular attention to what they characterize as “secret” speeches by Xi Jinping, implying that these sources in particular hold information that the CCP wishes to conceal and that may reveal his true intentions. The use of such documents is most evident in the 2022 article *Xi Jinping in His Own Words* by Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith.¹²⁷ The “secret” documents they refer to are those that were leaked or later publicized by official channels. They cite portions of the following “secret” speeches and documents: a 2012 Xi speech in Guangzhou to Party cadres that was leaked by a journalist in 2013; a 2013 Xi speech to new and alternative members of the CCP’s Central Committee that was officially published in 2019; Central Committee Document No. 9 from April 2013 that was leaked in the summer of 2013; and a

¹²⁴ Wang, “What Are the ‘Three Magic Weapons’ That Made the Chinese Revolution Successful?” [“中国革命取得成功的‘三大法宝’是什么？”].

¹²⁵ Han, “Reform and Opening Up Is an ‘Important Magic Weapon’ Study General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Important Remarks on Comprehensively Deepening Reform.”

¹²⁶ The China Story, “Jiang Shigong on ‘Philosophy and History: Interpreting the ‘Xi Jinping Era’ Through Xi’s Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP.”

¹²⁷ Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith, “Xi Jinping in His Own Words.”

speech made during the sixth plenum of the 19th party congress in November 2021 that was later officially released in January 2022.

There are two issues in how these “secret” documents are portrayed to the readers. Of the four documents characterized as secret, only two of them were actually leaked. The other two were published later by the CCP—and the authors do not provide the reader with an explanation to what they mean by secret in these cases. For example, Pottinger et al. claim, “like many of Xi’s most aggressive and important speeches, his Sixth Plenum speech was initially kept secret.”¹²⁸ The speech to which they are referring was delivered on November 11, 2021, and publicly released on January 1, 2022.¹²⁹ This type of one-to-two month lag is not uncommon for plenary leadership speeches in China and is not unique to Xi’s Sixth Plenum speech at the 19th Party Congress.¹³⁰

As a point of reference, the 6th plenum speech of the 18th Party Congress was delivered by Xi on October 27, 2016, and released publicly on December 31, 2016.¹³¹ There was actually a greater lag for the 18th Party Congress speech of 65 days than there was for the 2021 speech, which had a release lag of 50 days. In some ways, the 2016 speech should draw greater attention than the 2021 speech in terms of its secretiveness, given its longer lag and that even to this day, the full text appears to have not been entirely released. To be clear, Xi’s plenary session speeches are authoritative and warrant serious consideration, but by overemphasizing the significance of a brief delay in the release of the 2021 speech, Pottinger et al. contribute to an unnecessary exaggeration of its importance as a potentially concealed statement of China’s intentions.

A more notable length of time for a lag in release of a speech is the six-year gap identified by Pottinger et al. when the 2013 speech to new alternate members of the 18th Party Congress was released in the CCP magazine *Qiushi* in 2019. Of note, initial readouts appeared at the time of the speech, but more-comprehensive parts of the text were not published until six years later. It is not unusual for *Qiushi* to publish lengthier leadership speeches for further study. However, the authors again do not provide any context for the baseline around when, whether, and to what extent these types of speeches are publicly released at all. In this case, did the CCP make the 2013 speech public at a certain time to drive home a policy point, or is it that they finally released a speech that they traditionally would have made public sooner?

While it is beyond the scope of this study to establish patterns of releases of official documents, we know that the type of speech Xi made to new and alternate members of the Party congress is not a unique type of speech, as his predecessors also delivered them. In the case of

¹²⁸ Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith, “Xi Jinping in His Own Words.”

¹²⁹ Xi, “Learn from History to Create the Future, Work Hard and Forge Ahead with Courage” [“以史为鉴、开创未来 埋头苦干、勇毅前行”].

¹³⁰ Xi, “Learn from History to Create the Future, Work Hard and Forge Ahead with Courage.”

¹³¹ Xi, “Speech at the Second Plenary Session of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Party [“党的十八届六中全会第二次全体会议上的讲话”].

Hu Jintao, it appears that excerpts from this type of speech he gave at the 17th Party Congress in December 2007 were printed the following year in September 2008.¹³² It is unclear why this gap occurred. But because the Party has ultimately chosen to release the documents, perhaps the conversation should be about why the Party decides to release certain documents at certain points in time instead of casting them as secret since after all, speeches are not really secret if they are officially made public.

Moreover, Pottinger et al. rely primarily on documents from a formative period of Xi's leadership, potentially distorting their interpretation of his strategic intentions. Of the eight authoritative sources they cite, five date from 2013 or earlier, and two of these are the secret documents that were leaked.¹³³ This is a time when Xi had only recently assumed power as General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. In this early phase, Xi was focused on consolidating his authority, asserting control over the Party, and signaling a more commanding ideological direction.¹³⁴ To be sure, these early speeches are critical to understanding Xi's worldview, especially because there was still significant uncertainty at the time about the kind of leader he would become. Many analysts initially harbored hopes that he might be a reformer open to greater economic liberalization, but these hopes were dispelled by these documents, especially the leaked ones because they were seen to hold his true intentions.¹³⁵

¹³² Hu, "Continue to Advance the Great Cause of Reform and Opening Up" ["继续把改革开放伟大事业推向前进"].

¹³³ The eight authoritative sources cited by Pottinger, Johnson, and Feith in their 2022 article are as follows:

- December 2012 speech by Xi Jinping: Delivered to Party cadres in Guangdong Province, in which he emphasized the need for ideological discipline and the dangers of political liberalization.
- January 2013 speech by Xi Jinping: Given to new members of the CCP Central Committee, outlining Xi's views on governance, the Party's historical mission, and the necessity of centralized control.
- April 2013 speech by Xi Jinping: In which Xi warned against constitutionalism and Western political ideas, reinforcing the CCP's role as the ultimate authority in Chinese governance.
- Late 2013 six-part documentary: A documentary series that Xi reportedly required Party leaders at all levels to watch, highlighting ideological threats and reinforcing the importance of Party unity.
- 2013 Beijing National Defense University documentary: A military-focused documentary that underscored the necessity of ideological control within the armed forces and the CCP's dominance over military affairs.
- January 2021 speech by Xi Jinping: Delivered to high-ranking cadres, in which Xi reflected on ideological struggles and the importance of Party discipline in the face of external and internal challenges.
- November 2021 speech by Xi Jinping: Delivered at the Sixth Plenum meeting of Communist Party leaders, emphasizing Party history, ideological continuity, and Xi's personal leadership role.
- 2018 speech by Xi Jinping: Given in Beijing marking the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth, in which Xi reaffirmed the CCP's commitment to Marxist principles and ideological orthodoxy.

¹³⁴ Blanchette, "Xi's Gamble."

¹³⁵ Denyer, "China's Leader, Xi Jinping, Consolidates Power with Crackdowns on Corruption, Internet."

However, shaping a 2022 analysis of Xi's strategic motivations primarily around this earlier period presents an incomplete picture. It neglects the broader corpus of CCP central documents that could provide a more comprehensive view of how Xi's thinking has evolved over the past decade. The authors do not contextualize this specific tranche of documents within China's shifting domestic political environment, particularly the unique dynamics of 2012–2013 when Xi was in the process of consolidating his grip on power.

The Nuance Offered by Chinese Authors on Strategic Space

In her report on Chinese strategic space, Rolland portrays Chinese theorists as being evasive in expressing their true intentions to become imperial and expansionist. According to Rolland,

Chinese theorists go to great lengths so as to not explicitly convey that what they have in mind is a significantly expanded Chinese realm. They unanimously resort to justifying expansion by presenting it as purely defensive and therefore not the same as Western expansionism or imperialism. Despite all their efforts to conceal it, the intent of Chinese theorists is unmistakable.¹³⁶

Rolland repeatedly points to explicit examples of Chinese authors stating how they envision China's expanding influence. For example, she quotes a professor at PLA National Defense University (NDU), which, even with its PLA affiliation, has questionable influence over CCP senior leadership. The PLA NDU professor asserts that China must "inevitably" expand its interests and influence beyond its original territory to a wider one.¹³⁷ Another paper she cites authored by a group of university professors states that China "cannot be confined to a narrow space forever."¹³⁸ While Chinese strategists may not explicitly embrace the concepts of Western expansionism and imperialism, they are nonetheless clear about their desire for China to expand its global influence.

While Rolland dismisses defensive reasons for China's expansion as masking China's true intentions, explicit statements of defensive motivations feature prominently in Chinese writings. Major General Peng Guangqian suggests that the idea of a strategic space is the antidote to containment—a mechanism for breaking through or breaking out of the U.S.-aligned ring perceived to be surrounding China.¹³⁹ Similarly, East China Normal University Professor Du Debin stresses the need for China to "break the containment of the West" and calls for scholars to establish geopolitical goals to guide the country's "peaceful rise."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Rolland, "Mapping China's Strategic Space," p. 57.

¹³⁷ Rolland, "Mapping China's Strategic Space," p. 57.

¹³⁸ Rolland, "Mapping China's Strategic Space," p. 57.

¹³⁹ Peng, "Strategic Westward: Balance the Negative Energy of the U.S. Strategic Eastward Shift with Positive Energy" ["战略西出：以正能量平衡美国战略东移的负能量"].

¹⁴⁰ Du et al., "Progress in Geopolitics of Chinese Geographical Research Since 1990" ["1990 年以来中国地理学之地缘政治学研究进展"].

Based on the materials Rolland cites, it appears that the work of Chinese theorists tends to reflect two different conceptions: (1) that, as a rising power, China is entitled to an expanded strategic space and (2) that this strategic space is also a response to Western containment. All of this can be true at once. By overstating Chinese evasiveness for not adopting certain terms, Rolland's work suggests that the Chinese are being insidious about their intentions when in fact they are quite clear that China's push for expanded strategic space is both a natural outcome of its rise and a direct response to external geopolitical pressures.

Some of the historical examples that Rolland cites to reinforce her arguments about Chinese imperialism are open to various interpretations. When citing a 1987 *PLA Daily* article by Senior Colonel Xu Guangyu to illustrate the early origins of the strategic frontier concept,¹⁴¹ Rolland interprets Xu's ideas on "strategic frontier" as emphasizing expansionist or imperialist intentions, linking his use of historical examples such as Genghis Khan and the British Empire to a desire for territorial expansion.¹⁴² Yet Xu does not present these historical examples as models for China's strategy but rather as a means of illustrating the evolution from one-dimensional to multidimensional strategic boundaries, in the sense that contemporary strategic boundaries encompass much more than just geographical land and extend to other spheres such as cybersecurity. This is not unlike the expansion of the U.S. military's operational domain concept in 2009 to include, for the first time, the functional domain of cyberspace in addition to its traditional domains of land, sea, air, and space.¹⁴³ One way of reading Xu's examples, then, is as suggesting not that China aspires to be like empires of the past, but instead that China appreciates the need to expand its ability to operate in more strategic spaces—as any major power would, and as the United States already has.

It is important to note that the concept of "strategic space" advanced by Chinese theorists is not necessarily new. In fact, it can be understood as a rephrasing of the idea of spheres of influence, a concept that has been central to international relations for centuries. The 1823 Monroe Doctrine, for instance, established the Western Hemisphere as the United States' sphere of influence and declared it off-limits to European powers. This was not a call for imperial conquest, but an assertion—coercive and hierarchical, to be sure—of the necessity for control over a particular region for both security and political stability. Similarly, the notion of strategic space as put forward by Chinese scholars reflects the idea that a rising power requires a certain amount of territorial and geopolitical maneuvering room to safeguard its interests and preserve its autonomy. Of course, just as the Monroe Doctrine justified a series of U.S. interventions in

¹⁴¹ The interpretation of the article is already limited by her reliance on a 1988 English translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, which might not capture original Chinese connotations for military terms. For example, Xu uses the term "strategic frontiers," which is different than the focus of Rolland's work on strategic space. It is difficult to know, without the original Chinese article, whether Xu was actually referring to the concept of strategic space.

¹⁴² Rolland, "Mapping China's Strategic Space," p. 5.

¹⁴³ Joint Force Headquarters—Department of Defense Information Network, "Our History."

the Western Hemisphere and was not popular with many countries,¹⁴⁴ China's expansion of its strategic space is likely to face similar criticism for understandable reasons. But China's seeking of a sphere of influence in these terms does not necessarily imply intentions to pursue large-scale military adventurism.

Downplaying Calls for Stability

Chinese documents that describe the concept of strategic space often discourage China from upsetting the international environment, because stability is portrayed as indispensable to achieving the country's economic and technological goals. However, Rolland downplays this expressed need for a stable external environment. For example, she uses Xu's article to argue that there is a broad consensus among Chinese strategists that hegemonic expansion is a necessary phase in the country's rise to great-power status. In one sense, such a vision would appear to rule out stable coexistence with China's leading rival for global influence.

Yet even documents that spell out the importance of strategic space, such as Xu's article, continue to accept the importance of such stability. In fact, Xu asserts that the concept of strategic frontier is "neither expansion of geographic borders nor expansionist or hegemonic aggressive expansion of strategic boundaries."¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Rolland cites a 2013 article by Peking University professor Wang Jisi to argue that "Chinese strategists and leaders . . . expand their strategic horizons to the entire world . . . without ever acknowledging their hegemonic intent."¹⁴⁶ Again, Rolland dismisses Wang's call for "China to maintain a sober head and a modest and prudent attitude" whereby it should not alienate "important countries" such as the United States.¹⁴⁷ By selectively emphasizing expansionist interpretations while downplaying calls for stability, Rolland does not capture the full range of Chinese strategic thinking. This matters because it reinforces the narrative that China is inherently driven toward hegemonic expansion, overlooking internal debates and competing priorities within its strategic discourse.

Chinese Geopolitical Ambitions and the Potential for Stabilizing the Rivalry

In this chapter, we have identified areas where the interpretation of Chinese leadership speeches, official documents, and the writings of strategic thinkers warrants greater debate and scrutiny. By highlighting debates about and nuances in interpretation and translation, rather than viewing China's assertiveness in absolute terms, our analysis suggests it exists on a continuum that is informed by situational, historical, and linguistic contexts. Strategists in China, for

¹⁴⁴ American Battlefield Trust, "The Monroe Doctrine."

¹⁴⁵ Xu, *Extending Strategic Boundaries Past Geographic Borders*.

¹⁴⁶ Rolland, "Mapping China's Strategic Space," p. 46.

¹⁴⁷ Wang, "Dongxinanbei, Zhongguo ju 'zhong': Yi zhong zhanlüe daqiju sikao" [East, West, South, North and China in the Middle: Pondering over the Strategic Chessboard].

example, see their country as an expanding global power that deserves new spheres of influence, but do not view these endeavors as imperialistic or historically unique, and remain at least conceptually wedded to the idea that China will remain a peaceful and legitimate world power. These Chinese strategists also emphasize the importance of establishing a stable external environment to enable China's growth. China's efforts to become more proactive on the international stage and develop a "world-class" military are not necessarily always intended to be offensive in nature. These alternative interpretations portray a China and Xi that are more flexible and perhaps more approachable as international counterparts even despite the very real threats emanating from them.

While this chapter has primarily focused on how Western analysts portray China's ambitions, it is also important to consider how Chinese officials and scholars have themselves conceptualized China's place in the international system and the concept of coexistence. Though often dismissed by Western analysts as jargon, coexistence has had a long history in CCP foreign policy. The following concepts play a central role in how Beijing seeks to project itself as a responsible actor committed to global equality, inclusiveness, and stability.

Pre Xi Concepts of Peace and Coexistence: Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处五项原则) and Peaceful Development (和平发展)

In 1954, Premier Zhou Enlai formally introduced the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" (和平共处五项原则)—mutual respect for sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence—as the foundation of China's foreign relations.¹⁴⁸ First codified in a Sino-Indian treaty and reaffirmed during Zhou's visits to India and Burma, these principles aimed to promote diplomacy across ideological divides.¹⁴⁹ Zhou emphasized that nations with different systems could peacefully coexist and resolve disputes through dialogue. The principles soon gained broader international traction, influencing the 1955 Bandung Conference and contributing to the intellectual foundations of the Non-Aligned Movement.¹⁵⁰ Chinese leaders have consistently portrayed them as China's first major contribution to global diplomatic norms.¹⁵¹ Within China's own political system, the principles were incorporated into the Preamble of the PRC Constitution and reaffirmed by successive leaders as universal norms guiding an "independent foreign policy

¹⁴⁸ Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China, "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" ["和平共处五项原则"].

¹⁴⁹ "Centennial Moments: Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" ["百年瞬间：和平共处五项原则"].

¹⁵⁰ "Centennial Moments: Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence."

¹⁵¹ Xi, "Carrying Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and Jointly Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind."

of peace.”¹⁵² To this day, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence remain a touchstone of Chinese foreign policy and have been reiterated by every Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping.¹⁵³

By the early 2000s, Beijing began advancing a new diplomatic narrative known as “peaceful rise” (和平崛起) to address growing concerns abroad about China’s expanding economic and military power.¹⁵⁴ Coined by Zheng Bijian in 2003, the term aimed to reassure the international community that China’s emergence would not follow the aggressive path of previous great powers.¹⁵⁵ Premier Wen Jiabao publicly endorsed the idea, but Chinese leaders soon recognized that the word “rise” (崛起) could be perceived as threatening.¹⁵⁶ By 2004, Hu Jintao and others shifted the terminology to “peaceful development” (和平发展), which became the official framing. In 2005 and 2011, white papers from the State Council formalized the doctrine, declaring peaceful development a “strategic choice” and emphasizing mutual benefit, multilateralism, and non-hegemony.¹⁵⁷ This vision was reinforced in a 2010 policy essay by State Councilor Dai Bingguo, who described peaceful development as a permanent national commitment. Dai explicitly stated that China would never seek hegemony and quoted Deng Xiaoping when saying that the world should “oppose and overthrow” China if it ever does.¹⁵⁸

Community of Common Destiny (人类命运共同体)

In the Xi era, Chinese leaders reoriented this tradition toward a more globally encompassing vision of coexistence. The phrase “community of common destiny for mankind” (人类命运共同体) first entered official CCP discourse in Hu Jintao’s 2012 political report to the 18th Party Congress, where it was framed as an extension of China’s traditional commitment to mutual benefit, peaceful development, and sovereign equality.¹⁵⁹ In that context, Hu called for “a community with a shared future for mankind,” emphasizing cooperation over confrontation in addressing shared global challenges.

¹⁵² Wen, “Carrying Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the Promotion of Peace and Development.”

¹⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Build a New International Order on the Basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”; “President Jiang on Principles of Building New World Order”; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Hu Jintao Addresses the General Debate of the 64th General Assembly Session”; Wang, “The Historic Step from Peaceful Coexistence to a Shared Future for Humanity.”

¹⁵⁴ Glaser and Medeiros, “The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China.”

¹⁵⁵ Zheng, “China’s Peaceful Rise.”

¹⁵⁶ Glaser, and Medeiros, “The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China.”

¹⁵⁷ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Peaceful Development Road”; State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China.

¹⁵⁸ Dai, “Adhere to the Path of Peaceful Development.”

¹⁵⁹ Hu, “Continue to Promote the Noble Cause of Peace and Development for Mankind.”

Under Xi, the idea was transformed from a normative aspiration into a centerpiece of foreign policy doctrine.¹⁶⁰ Xi introduced the phrase on the international stage during a 2013 speech in Moscow, calling on all nations to reject zero-sum Cold War mentalities and instead build a “global village” based on interdependence.¹⁶¹ Over the following years, Xi repeatedly invoked the concept across diplomatic forums, pairing it with his vision for a “new type of international relations” and extending it to various regional and thematic subdomains—including ASEAN, cyberspace, public health, and nuclear security.¹⁶² The phrase was codified into Party ideology at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, incorporated into the PRC Constitution in 2018, and identified by Politburo leaders as the guiding objective of China’s diplomacy in the “New Era.”¹⁶³

Chinese theorists portray this vision as a distinctly Chinese contribution to global governance. In official articulations, it is described not only as a moral imperative but also as a strategic framework for responding to global challenges—one that rejects hegemonic dominance and prioritizes dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect.¹⁶⁴ The concept emphasizes that transnational problems can be addressed without subordinating national sovereignty, exporting ideology, or imposing political values. In CCP discourse, building a community of common destiny also entails supporting each nation’s right to choose its own development model, promoting cooperative security, and reforming global governance institutions to give greater voice to developing countries.¹⁶⁵

New Type of Major Power Relationship (新型大国关系)

As China’s global influence grew in the early 2010s, Chinese leaders introduced the concept of a “New Type of Major Power Relationship” (新型大国关系) as an effort to reframe how great powers like the United States and China could coexist peacefully despite competing

¹⁶⁰ Zhou, “The Formation, Practice and Contemporary Value of the Concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.”

¹⁶¹ Xi, “President Xi Jinping Delivered an Important Speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.”

¹⁶² Xi, “Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-Win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind”; Zhou, “The Formation, Practice and Contemporary Value of the Concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”; Yan, “Promoting the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind During a Period of Turbulence and Change in the World.”

¹⁶³ Chen, “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind”; Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”; Jia, “Twenty Topics of the 20th CPC National Congress.”

¹⁶⁴ Xi, “Carry Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and Work Together to Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.”

¹⁶⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi Expounds China’s Views on Improving Global Governance.”

interests.¹⁶⁶ Chinese officials framed the idea as a break from the historical pattern of conflict between rising and established powers, arguing instead for mutual respect, win-win cooperation, and the avoidance of confrontation.¹⁶⁷

The concept first gained prominence in 2012 during a visit to Washington when then–Vice President Xi Jinping called for a “new type of relationship between major countries” and urged both sides to transcend Cold War thinking.¹⁶⁸ Outgoing President Hu Jintao and senior officials like Dai Bingguo echoed the theme at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue later that year, emphasizing that past great-power rivalries were not an inevitable outcome.¹⁶⁹ When Xi formally assumed power, the idea was written into the 18th Party Congress report, which called for stable and constructive relations with other major countries.¹⁷⁰ Xi formally presented the framework to President Obama at the 2013 Sunnylands summit, outlining three principles: no conflict or confrontation, mutual respect (especially for core interests), and win-win cooperation.¹⁷¹

In Chinese foreign policy discourse, the New Type of Major Power Relationship was seen as an application of China’s long-standing doctrine of peaceful coexistence to relations among global powers.¹⁷² Chinese theorists frequently cited the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence as the intellectual foundation, arguing that the new framework extended these principles to great-power dynamics.¹⁷³ Officials emphasized that even major countries with different political systems could avoid zero-sum logic and instead coexist through mutual accommodation. At its core, the concept was linked to China’s domestic need for a stable external environment conducive to continued development and national rejuvenation.¹⁷⁴

Though initially framed with the United States in mind, Chinese diplomats soon extended the idea to other powers, including Russia.¹⁷⁵ It became a central feature of early Xi-era diplomacy and appeared widely in speeches and official documents from 2013 to 2016. However, U.S.

¹⁶⁶ Xi Jinping, “Strive to Build a New Type of Major Power Relations Between China and the United States: Speech at the Joint Opening Ceremony of the Sixth Round of China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue and the Fifth Round of China-U.S. High-Level Consultation on People-to-People Exchanges” [“努力构建中美新型大国关系——在第六轮中美战略与经济对话和第五轮中美人文交流高层磋商联合开幕式上的致辞”].

¹⁶⁷ Xi, “Strive to Build a New Type of Major-Country Relationship Between China and the United States.”

¹⁶⁸ Chase, “China’s Search for a ‘New Type of Great Power Relationship.’”

¹⁶⁹ Hu, “Promote Mutually Beneficial and Win-Win Cooperation and Develop a New Type of Major Power Relations: Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Fourth Round of China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue.”

¹⁷⁰ Chen, “Building a New China-U.S. Relationship.”

¹⁷¹ Li and Xu, “Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism over the ‘New Type of Great Power Relations.’”

¹⁷² Chase, “China’s Search for a ‘New Type of Great Power Relationship.’”

¹⁷³ Zhao, “The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: An Important Foundation for Building International Relations.”

¹⁷⁴ Li and Xu, “Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism over the ‘New Type of Great Power Relations.’”

¹⁷⁵ Wang, “Mature and Stable China-Russia Relations Stand at the Forefront of New Major Power Relations.”

official counterparts and foreign policy analysts saw the concept as a way to potentially trap the United States into recognizing China's territorial claims and never fully embraced it.¹⁷⁶ As strategic tensions with the United States continued to deepen in the late 2010s, the phrase largely disappeared from the PRC's official usage.¹⁷⁷ By 2021, Xi continued to advocate for mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation, but no longer used the original label.¹⁷⁸ Although the terminology has faded, the underlying logic persists. Chinese leaders continue to emphasize the need for peaceful coexistence among great powers, grounded in sovereign equality, and non-interference.

Three Global Initiatives: Global Development Initiative (全球发展倡议), the Global Security Initiative (全球安全倡议), and the Global Civilization Initiative (全球文明倡议)

In recent years, Chinese leaders have sought to operationalize their vision of global coexistence through three complementary frameworks: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). Introduced by Xi between 2021 and 2023, these initiatives are described in official discourse as three mutually reinforcing pillars that reflect China's normative approach to international order centered on mutual benefit, non-interference, and pluralism.¹⁷⁹ Each initiative addresses a distinct domain—economic development, security governance, and cultural exchange—but collectively they promote Beijing's foreign policy narrative that the world's challenges can be met through dialogue and cooperation rather than confrontation.¹⁸⁰

The GDI, unveiled at the 76th UN General Assembly in 2021, aims to recenter global attention on equitable development and the needs of the Global South.¹⁸¹ Framed as a “global public good,” the initiative emphasizes poverty alleviation, food and health security, climate resilience, and connectivity.¹⁸² Its guiding principles, such as development first and harmony with nature, echo domestic Chinese governance slogans.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁶ Li and Xu, “Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism over the ‘New Type of Great Power Relations.’”

¹⁷⁷ Wertime, “China Quietly Abandoning Bid for ‘New Model of Great Power Relations’ with U.S.”

¹⁷⁸ “Xi Jinping: China and the United States Should Respect Each Other, Coexist Peacefully, and Cooperate for Mutual Benefit.”

¹⁷⁹ Yang, “China's Three Global Initiatives.”

¹⁸⁰ Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, “Taking the Implementation of Three Major Global Initiatives as Strategic Guidance—Promote the World Towards a Bright Future of Peace, Security, Prosperity and Progress.”

¹⁸¹ “Xi Jinping Puts Forward Global Development Initiative.”

¹⁸² “Refocus, Reenergize, and Reshape: The Global Contribution of Global Development Initiatives.”

¹⁸³ “Refocus, Reenergize, and Reshape: The Global Contribution of Global Development Initiatives.”

The GSI, introduced in 2022 amid intensifying geopolitical tensions, extends the logic of coexistence into the security realm.¹⁸⁴ Drawing on earlier Chinese concepts, including “common and comprehensive security,” the initiative promotes an international order based on sovereign equality, peaceful dispute resolution, and opposition to bloc politics. It explicitly rejects Cold War mentalities and argues that security should be “indivisible”—that is, no state should pursue its own safety at the expense of others.¹⁸⁵ Official rhetoric frames the GSI as an effort to construct a more stable security architecture through dialogue and non-interference, updating the principles of peaceful coexistence for a multipolar world.

The GCI, launched in 2023, introduces a cultural and ideological dimension to China’s vision of coexistence.¹⁸⁶ The initiative advocates respect for civilizational diversity, mutual learning between cultures, and rejection of ideological imposition. Xi has described the world as a “garden of many civilizations,” arguing that different civilizations can modernize on their own terms without displacing one another.¹⁸⁷ The GCI promotes shared human values such as peace, development, and justice, but insists on tolerance for differing expressions of those values. It looks to position China as a defender of cultural pluralism and an alternative to what it portrays as Western ideological hegemony.¹⁸⁸

Together, the Three Global Initiatives offer a comprehensive articulation of how China seeks to reshape global norms while maintaining its commitment to peaceful coexistence. Each initiative is presented as a practical extension of the long-standing Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and collectively they reinforce Beijing’s ambition to build a more inclusive world order.

Chinese Scholarly Views

Chinese academics also have offered some perspectives on coexistence. Debates about this topic in the academic space are noteworthy because they have more relative flexibility to debate coexistence and competition than does official discourse. Zhang Yunling observes that even though strategic competition between the United States and China is “inevitable,” it leaves a “great deal of room for maneuver.” He clarifies that he does not mean “shared interests” but reciprocal demands and shared responsibilities: “There is a need to focus on space for maneuver

¹⁸⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022.”

¹⁸⁵ “Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022.”

¹⁸⁶ “Xi Jinping Puts Forward Global Civilization Initiative.”

¹⁸⁷ “Let the World’s Garden of Civilization Bloom with Colorful Flowers and Full of Vitality” [“让世界文明百花园姹紫嫣红、生机盎然”].

¹⁸⁸ Lu, “Global Civilization Initiative: Breaking the Myth of ‘Modernization = Modernization’ from the Perspective of Civilization.”

and avoid intense confrontation between two countries.”¹⁸⁹ Feng Zhang offers the Confucian concept of “exemplary competition,” which is the idea that two sides can achieve excellence without defeating the other.¹⁹⁰ Even Yan Xuetong, who subscribes to the zero-sum framing of U.S.-China competition, envisions a China winning such a competition based on “humane authority”—leadership through moral example that wins heart and minds at home and abroad—arguably opens greater space for coexistence than other conceptions of military or economic competition.¹⁹¹ These examples demonstrate that academics tend to view coexistence as a viable and even desirable option with the United States, even as the two countries compete.

Conclusion: An Opening for Coexistence?

Across successive political eras, Chinese leaders have worked to sustain a cohesive self-image that advocates peaceful coexistence, sovereign equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference. By highlighting these initiatives, we do not suggest that China adheres to these principles in practice. But if U.S. analysts are adducing China’s intentions from its public statements, presumably those efforts must include the full range of Chinese messaging. While China behaves far more belligerently than these benign phrases would suggest, for example, many China scholars believe that the CCP very much *wants* to be viewed in these terms—as a responsible, peaceful leader of world politics and as an advocate for the rights and economic advancement of developing countries. Its medium- and long-term goals do not aspire to crude military hegemony but rather to achieving a position of unquestioned but still legitimate leadership at the top of a world hierarchy that views Chinese power in positive ways.

These more benign goals do not, of course, rule out Chinese adventurism. But they do suggest that its vision of its role in world politics is more complex than some highly alarmist interpretations would suggest. They also indicate that China will pay a significant cost in terms of its ambitions for legitimate leadership to the extent that it intensifies its coercive and adventuristic behavior.

China’s public discourse, in addition to our findings that some of its leadership rhetoric, when reexamined and retranslated, is not as extreme as has been previously portrayed, provide evidence for an opening for coexistence with the United States. The challenge is thus not whether the opening is possible but whether it can be leveraged. The next chapter examines the potential for stabilizing the U.S.-China relationship across a concrete set of issues.

¹⁸⁹ des Garets Geddes and Foot, “China and the World: Reflections by Zhang Yunling.”

¹⁹⁰ Feng, “Confucius Says: Get the Definition of US-China ‘Competition’ Right.”

¹⁹¹ Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, pp. 199–221; Yan, “How China Can Defeat America,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2011.

4. Issue Assessments: Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the U.S.-China Technology Competition

The last two chapters have attempted to define the parameters of what stabilizing a geopolitical rivalry can mean and argued that Chinese official statements and strategy documents do not, as it sometimes alleged, rule out the potential for any meaningful equilibrium in the relationship. To take the next step and assess the potential for stabilizing the U.S.-China rivalry in specific issue areas, we selected three topics that represent some of the more challenging areas of the relationship. These are Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the contest for leadership in science and technology. In each case, we commissioned an American and a Chinese scholar to offer their government's perspective on the issue, briefly give their views of the other side's perspective, and ultimately lay out steps that could contribute to stabilization on the issue.

In addition, we conducted a literature review of recent U.S. and Chinese reports and essays on two of these issue areas—Taiwan and the South China Sea—looking for proposals of initiatives to mitigate the competitive risks and stabilize the relationship. (Assessments focused on stabilizing the U.S.-China technology competition are still relatively underdeveloped, and we found few comparable analyses proposing specific steps.) We held a workshop among the paper authors and RAND experts to review the full range of proposals and generate final suggestions.

This chapter first briefly reviews the analysis of the six papers on these issues—their discussion of the goals and interests of both sides and barriers to mutual accommodation. We then review specific proposals for stabilization in each of the three areas, noting first the suggestions of the paper authors and then adding the results of the literature review. In each of those areas, we conclude by recommending a specific set of short- and medium-term steps.

In the process, we kept in mind the six broad principles for stabilizing a strategic rivalry defined in Chapter 2:

1. Each side accepts, in ways that are deeply ingrained and broadly shared among decisionmaking officials, that some degree of *modus vivendi* must necessarily be part of the relationship, imposed by objective factors such as the nature of the international system and the existence of nuclear weapons. In the process, each side admits that the effective destruction of the other is not a feasible option.
2. Each side accepts the essential political legitimacy of the other.
3. In specific issue areas, especially those in dispute between the two sides, both work to develop sets of shared rules, norms, institutions, and other tools that create lasting conditions of a stable *modus vivendi* within that domain over a specific period (such as three to five years). This does not presume an end to strong competition, only the development of mechanisms that allow each side to believe that its most vital interests in that issue area have some protection during a defined time frame.

4. Both sides practice restraint in the development of capabilities explicitly designed to undermine the deterrent and defensive capabilities of the other in ways that would create an existential risk to its homeland.
5. Each side accepts some essential list of characteristics of a shared vision of organizing principles for world politics that can provide at least a baseline for an agreed status quo. These could include things like a relatively open international trading system, the value of stabilizing the international financial context, the need to respect state sovereignty absent formal international consensus otherwise, the importance of developing environmental protection capabilities and mechanisms, and the need to avoid direct conflict between nuclear-armed states.
6. There are mechanisms and institutions in place—from long-term personal ties to physical communication links to agreed norms and rules of engagement for crises and risky situations—that help provide a moderating or return-to-stable-equilibrium function.

As we sought to identify possible stabilizing initiatives in the areas below, we looked first for ideas that would reflect one or more of those principles. We found ways in which their broad injunctions could be made relevant to each of the three issues.

In our research and in the discussions at the authors' workshop, it became increasingly apparent that—especially given the current condition and trajectory of the U.S.-China relationship—developing any meaningful stabilizing initiatives in these three contentious issues will be extremely difficult. The political and operational scope for impactful steps is very limited. The rivalry is based on conflicting interests and ambitions, not mere misunderstandings.

The emergence of *détente* during the Cold War, while holding out hope that rivals can realize the need for and value of mutual accommodation in the name of stability, also demonstrates the significant distance that the United States and China still need to travel. By the late 1960s, Washington and Moscow had been banging away at the competition long enough—had lived through enough close calls and understood the unsustainable costs of an unrestrained contest—to provide them with a powerfully felt appreciation for the essential role of restraint and stabilization. It's not clear that the United States or China are anywhere close to such a perception today.

Moreover, efforts to trigger stabilizing dynamics are complicated by the fact that China perceives the United States as in decline and China on an inexorable rise to global leadership. Its view of the world is also colored by a sense of itself as the preeminent civilization, a society to whom others owe some degree of natural deference. This is, it must be realized, an inherent problem when dealing with a rising, self-confident great power with expansive conceptions of its role in world politics. Such powers will tend to view any concessions to their demands as simply appropriate recognition of what Chinese sources often describe as “rightful” claims—steps that are entirely justified on their own terms and require no meaningful response.

Beijing also tends to link rather than separate issues, which creates another notably difficulty in pursuing discrete channels of stabilization. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was willing to compartmentalize—to pursue arms control while undertaking proxy wars in Africa, for

example—in ways that allowed the two sides to pursue stability in some areas while competing fiercely in others. China tends to link issues rather than separating them—cancelling climate dialogues, for example, in retaliation for a visit of the U.S. House Speaker to Taiwan, and demanding relief from export controls as the price for a deeper dialogue on AI safety. Picking off individual targets of opportunity is very difficult given such an approach by one side.

Partly as a result of these constraints, we did not seek to develop an agenda of grand accommodations or cooperation spirals. Our approach here is transactional and issue-specific rather than catalytic—seeking to ease the mutual paranoia and hostility of the relationship in important ways, but not ones that will necessarily generate broad-based processes of cooperation. Moreover, our theory of stabilization fully recognizes that, from a U.S. standpoint, sustaining the credibility of U.S. commitments and deterrent power is an essential ingredient in stability, and that any initiative must take seriously its potential to signal to Beijing that the United States is becoming exhausted with the competition. Many of the proposals below, in fact, speak to the value of clarifying red lines or enhancing deterrence as part of this agenda.

In service of this general approach, we developed stabilizing initiatives in three categories. The first represents high-level political and strategic signaling and dialogue to break out of the structural dynamic of an escalating zero-sum rivalry and take control of the relationship. These steps will be partly symbolic and will not resolve any of the issues below, but they can help to set the broader conditions for resolving them peacefully. These reflect the first, second, and fifth principles outlined above.

The second category of initiatives encompasses near-term steps to create tangible movement in the direction of stabilization in the issue areas. Because of the strict constraints on major stabilizing moves, these are relatively modest steps, but they can be symbolically important. They can also signal the potential willingness to build on the initial moves and help to shape the wider environment for stability. Depending on their content, these initiatives could reflect the third or fourth principle of stabilization noted above.

Finally, the third type of stabilizing proposal we describe in each issue area holds open the hope for the possibility of more-dramatic moves in the future. This category defines bolder options that could emerge based on changing circumstances. Those circumstances could include changes in attitude based on the rising cost of the rivalry, possible leadership change over the medium term, or new theories of competitive advantage on one or both sides. Some of these will become plausible in particular when one or both sides are willing to make concessions or compromises that become the justification for the other side to match its magnanimity. Even if the political and strategic context is not open to them at the moment, we believe it is important to define plausible bolder initiatives to demonstrate the possibility for a more fundamental stabilization that continues to protect the core interests of both sides.

Chapter 2 laid out our essential objective in limited terms. Our focus in this analysis is not finding ways to transcend the U.S.-China rivalry, or even to establish a secure, formalized, and lasting form of coexistence. It is merely to identify avenues to stabilizing what will remain a

contentious and at times dangerous context between the world's two leading powers. It is in that constrained but critical spirit that we offer the proposals that follow.

As we have stressed, the credibility of U.S. commitments and deterrent power can play a useful role alongside initiatives to reassure the other side and stabilize the relationship. Drawing firm lines on unacceptable coercive behavior can pair effectively with specific stabilizing mechanisms to reduce the chances of escalatory moves. Seeking stability is not an alternative to calculated firmness: They are two sides of the same strategic approach. The trick, in all three cases, is to balance reassurance and provocation in ways that support both credibility and stabilization. The United States can take risk to bolster credibility and deterrence where things provide meaningful differences—such as measurably improving Philippine or Taiwanese defensive capabilities. It should avoid actions that provoke and risk escalation merely for political signaling, without notably contributing to deterrence.

Stabilizing the Rivalry: General Initiatives

In Chapter 2, we translated the criteria for stabilization outlined above into a set of broad and general categories of ideas and initiatives. These provide a starting point for an agenda to stabilize the rivalry and would comprise the foundation for an effort to establish an equilibrium in the relationship:

1. *Clarify U.S. objectives in the rivalry with language that explicitly rejects absolute versions of victory and accepts the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.* The United States can lay the foundations for a process of stabilization by consistently broadcasting messages that seek that core precondition for stability: mutual recognition of legitimacy. This will not change Chinese views of U.S. intentions, which are highly suspicious and even paranoid, in the short term. But it can nevertheless serve an important atmospheric purpose.
2. *Reestablish several trusted lines of communications between senior officials.*¹⁹² The Biden administration worked hard to create such links, allowing pairs of senior officials to communicate regularly for various purposes. These included clarifying U.S. interests and red lines but also working to resolve disputes and avoid escalations of crises. Yet those efforts achieved only so much, and U.S.-China diplomatic channels remained limited. The Trump administration should seek to establish several overlapping lines of communication between senior officials.
3. *Improve crisis-management practices, links, and agreements between the two sides.*¹⁹³ This will be challenging in part because China (and especially the PLA) has shown little interest in crisis-management mechanisms, appearing to see them as threats to its ability to use crises for strategic effect. But there are some recent signs that Beijing has

¹⁹² On this specific issue see Culver, “The Balloon Drama Was a Drill.”

¹⁹³ On this specific issue, see Swaine, “Avoiding the Abyss”; Swaine, “How to Break the Impasse in U.S.-China Crisis Communication”; Morris, “China’s Views on Escalation and Crisis Management and Implications for the United States”; and International Crisis Group, “Risky Competition.”

recognized the strategic risk involved in confrontational actions such as unsafe intercepts of U.S. ships and aircraft. It may be possible to build on that with modest additional steps, whether formalized or private commitments, including standards for maritime crises building on the Maritime Military Consultative Agreement (MMCA) and Rules of Behavior. Initially, given limits to both sides' willingness to compromise, the goals could be limited to creating a modest baseline of understandings and standards.¹⁹⁴ Eventually, the United States could also broach the idea of a new accord on par with the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement.¹⁹⁵

4. *Seek specific new agreements, a combination of formal public accords and private understandings, to limit the U.S.-China cyber competition.* This effort will require U.S. demands and cost-imposing steps in support of diplomacy. But as the Obama administration demonstrated in 2015, it is possible to achieve limited, temporary changes in Chinese behavior. The United States could propose a dialogue on standards for cyber conduct, beginning with the most dangerous potential actions, such as steps to actively undermine critical infrastructure short of major war.
5. *Declare mutual acceptance of strategic nuclear deterrence and a willingness to forswear technologies and doctrines that would place the other side's nuclear deterrent at risk.* China is rapidly expanding its nuclear deterrent force with a presumed goal of reaching some sort of parity with the United States. The United States and China began a tentative strategic stability dialogue in November 2023, and a new initiative could build on that. It could begin with extremely simple and basic statements regarding nuclear use and broad commitments not to threaten the security of the other side's deterrent.
6. *Seek modest cooperative ventures on issues of shared interests or humanitarian concern.* Most analyses of U.S.-China relations contain the same call for cooperation on global issues, from climate change to pandemic preparedness. While the theoretical case for collaboration on such issues seems obvious, producing real shared action has been very challenging in practice, partly because of intense mistrust on both sides. For its part, the United States will need to accept that collaborative ventures will provide China with an opportunity to enhance its global role on some issues and even gain influence—but that those trends are underway anyway, and collaboration has its own benefits. Both sides could try to engage this issue with extremely modest steps, perhaps including a cooperative humanitarian endeavor in a country where both have

¹⁹⁴ As one analysis suggested,

As for the Rules of Behavior, Washington and Beijing are unlikely to develop—through bilateral channels—either more detailed or legally binding rules that improve operational safety. The two parties could, however, pursue regular multilateral discussions that review compliance with existing international rules and norms more broadly, including those found in COLREGs, the Chicago Convention, CUES and UNCLOS, and, through that process, reduce the ambiguity surrounding terms and definitions. Raising these issues in multilateral channels could help depoliticize discussions and has the potential to appeal to Beijing's regional interests. (International Crisis Group, "Risky Competition," p. 26)

¹⁹⁵ Rush Doshi in 2020 suggested a specific set of actions to achieve these goals. These included consistent signaling about the need for reciprocity; seeking agreements on maritime rules of the road, especially for the China Coast Guard and Maritime Militia; more military-to-military engagements to improve operational understanding; and leader-to-leader dialogue. See Doshi, "Improving Risk Reduction and Crisis Management in US-China Relations."

significant investments; one or two very targeted scientific collaborations related to renewable energies; and quiet dialogues among scientific experts on future pandemic responses.

These general categories, such as political-strategic messaging and crisis management mechanisms, are also reflected in some of the issue-specific proposals below.

Assessment Summaries: Taiwan

The status of Taiwan is arguably the most contentious single issue between the United States and China. China views the island as irrevocably part of One China and has claimed the right to use force if necessary to achieve unification. The United States opposes the use of force and, though the Taiwan Relations Act and multiple presidential statements, has indicated that it could well come to Taiwan's defense in case of attack. Even short of war, political and military posturing around the issue has generated recurring crises with the potential to escalate into outright conflict. Recent trends in the security context have added danger to the situation by increasing Beijing's potential confidence in the use of force but also prompting political aggressiveness in Taiwan.

The U.S. Perspective

Taiwan is arguably the most complex and volatile issue in U.S.-China relations, touching on sovereignty, democratic values, military deterrence, and global economic stability. In her paper written for this study, Rorry Daniels, managing director of the Asia Society Policy Institute, begins by explaining how Taiwan has become both a symbol and a strategic node for the United States. Historically, U.S. policy has maintained ambiguity on Taiwan's status—taking no position on sovereignty while insisting that the issue be resolved peacefully and without coercion. This ambiguity has allowed Washington to balance deterrence and flexibility, preserving a notional red line against conflict while allowing a range of political futures for Taiwan. Over time, however, the convergence of strategic, ideological, and economic interests has made the U.S. posture toward Taiwan more rigid and more central to its broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

The geographic proximity of Taiwan to U.S. treaty allies such as Japan and the Philippines raises acute military concerns. Any PRC military action against Taiwan would pose direct risks to U.S. alliance commitments and could trigger broader conflict. Taiwan's location also has operational implications: If Beijing were to seize control of the island, it would gain an enhanced ability to project military power across the East and South China Seas, disrupt maritime traffic, and reshape the region's balance of power. The free flow of global commerce—much of which transits the Taiwan Strait and adjacent waters—is also at stake, reinforcing Taiwan's significance in global economic planning.

Daniels also underscores the growing salience of values-based arguments in U.S. support for Taiwan. Taiwan's democratic system has become a focal point of U.S. congressional and public support, especially since the island's democratization in the 1990s. Congressional backing, manifested through legislation, official visits, and arms sales, has been especially robust in response to perceived PRC coercion. Most U.S. administrations have highlighted democratic solidarity in its Taiwan policy, particularly in response to Beijing's post-2016 cutoff of communications with Taipei and the broader deterioration of U.S.-China relations. Events in Hong Kong have further shaped perceptions in Washington, strengthening the argument that Taiwan's autonomy is essential to defending liberal values in the region.

Semiconductors provide an additional economic and technological dimension to U.S. interests. Taiwan produces the majority of the world's advanced chips, with the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) alone fabricating over 90 percent of leading-edge semiconductors. While some manufacturing is relocating to U.S. allies, core research and intellectual property remain in Taiwan. This concentration of strategic technology heightens U.S. concerns that a PRC takeover would not only shift the military balance but also give China control over critical supply chains and commercial technologies.

Tracing the historical evolution of U.S. policy, Daniels divides it into four broad eras: post-civil war, the opening to China, post-Cold War engagement, and the current period of strategic competition. Each phase reveals shifting priorities in Washington's relationships with Beijing and Taipei, but also a continuous triangulation of power and policy. Initially, the U.S. strongly backed the Republic of China and the Kuomintang (KMT) regime in Taiwan, largely for anti-communist reasons. During the Nixon era, Washington pivoted toward Beijing while codifying strategic ambiguity through the Three Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act. In the post-Cold War period, engagement with both China and Taiwan grew in tandem, with arms sales becoming a key signaling mechanism. As strategic competition has hardened, U.S. policy has become more assertive, reinforcing informal ties with Taipei while challenging Beijing's regional behavior and coercive tactics. That could change over time: Although U.S. defense officials remain strongly committed to Taiwan, political and economic pressures may gradually erode the credibility of that commitment.

Daniels identifies several persistent challenges to resolving the Taiwan issue. First, ambiguity, while strategically useful, generates mismatched expectations and reactions. For example, U.S. arms sales provoke intense Chinese responses, even when delivery is delayed or strategically marginal. Second, a key asymmetry exists between U.S. and Chinese approaches: Washington focuses on process—how the issue is managed—whereas Beijing fixates on outcome, especially reunification. This misalignment leads each side to discount the other's signals and intentions.

A deeper challenge stems from the CCP's intense commitment to reunification, which it frames as central to regime legitimacy and national rejuvenation. China has invested heavily in isolating Taiwan diplomatically and applying economic and political pressure to close off paths

to formal independence. Beijing's framing of Taiwan as unfinished civil war business makes compromise difficult, and its pursuit of control over Taiwan's international space is seen in Washington as coercive and destabilizing.

From the Chinese perspective, Taiwan is a domestic issue linked to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and ideological competition. Daniels highlights how the CCP views Taiwan's democratic success as a threat to the legitimacy of China's political model. Beijing's stated preference is peaceful reunification by 2049, but interim strategies include military modernization, diplomatic isolation of Taipei, and leveraging economic inducements and deterrents to shape Taiwan's political landscape. While "One Country, Two Systems" remains the official policy framework, trust in this model has deteriorated sharply in Taiwan, particularly after events in Hong Kong.

In sum, Daniels portrays the Taiwan issue as not only a test of U.S. resolve and strategic clarity, but also as a core ideological and legitimacy issue for China. Both sides remain locked in a dynamic of deterrence and mistrust, shaped by deep historical legacies and contemporary power shifts. Despite mutual interest in stability, their diverging definitions of risk, red lines, and acceptable end states continue to complicate efforts to manage the cross-Straits status quo.

The Chinese Perspective

The Taiwan issue is the most sensitive and symbolically charged fault line in U.S.-China relations, linked to sovereignty, legitimacy, and the risk of major-power conflict. Jie Dalei, senior research fellow of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies and associate professor at the School of International Studies of Peking University, offers a Chinese perspective, portraying Taiwan as a core national interest rooted in the legacy of the "century of humiliation" and central to China's goal of national rejuvenation. In Jie's telling, reunification is not a peripheral aspiration, but a national imperative tied to Communist Party legitimacy and the identity of the Chinese state. He emphasizes that this view is not limited to political elites but widely shared across Chinese society. The policy commitment to preventing "Taiwan independence" and achieving reunification is codified in China's constitution, the Communist Party charter, the Anti-Secession Law, and the National Security Law. While geostrategic considerations are acknowledged, Jie stresses that they are not the driving force behind Chinese policy, which is instead driven by historical claims and deeply rooted emotional and ideological convictions.

Since the late 1970s, the Chinese approach to Taiwan has been framed around peaceful reunification under a "One Country, Two Systems" model. This shift, which replaced earlier calls for military liberation, was driven by China's reform and opening-up era and the normalization of U.S.-China diplomatic relations. The policy envisions peaceful development and what the author calls "integrated development" between the two sides, emphasizing economic ties, social exchanges, and policy coordination. Recent efforts, such as designating

Fujian Province as a “model zone” for integration, reflect this strategy. The goal is to create shared interests and emotional bonds that gradually lay the groundwork for reunification.

Nonetheless, China has refused to renounce the use of force. Two developments have reinforced this position: growing concerns about pro-independence trends in Taiwan, especially since the 1990s, and the perceived likelihood of U.S. military intervention. Jie notes that successive Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administrations, as well as more subtle shifts under KMT leaders, such as Lee Teng-hui, have undermined the “One China” framework. Simultaneously, events such as the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis solidified Chinese views that the United States would act militarily to prevent reunification. In response, China has modernized its military, expanded legal tools for countering pro-independence actions, and sought to deter external interference.

Jie outlines a set of red lines as defined by Beijing, including formal declarations of independence, constitutional changes redefining Taiwan’s status, and referendums on sovereignty. In recent years, China’s focus has shifted to so-called “incremental independence” moves: educational and cultural de-sinicization, restrictions on cross-Strait exchanges, and efforts to expand Taiwan’s international presence. U.S. support for these actions is perceived as a key obstacle to peaceful resolution. Jie argues that “external interference,” primarily from the United States, has prolonged the Taiwan issue and rendered peaceful reunification more difficult. In Chinese discourse, U.S. arms sales, high-level visits, and broader support for Taiwan’s international role are seen as violations of the three joint communiqués and a deliberate strategy to contain China’s rise.

Despite this, Jie holds that China continues to believe “time and trend” favor reunification. The integrated development framework is designed to incrementally narrow the gap between the two sides and build long-term political momentum. China remains open to political negotiations but considers conditions currently unfavorable. Jie stresses that such negotiations would need to address a range of issues beyond sovereignty—including governance models, international participation, and transitional arrangements. Still, if peaceful means are exhausted or red lines are crossed, military force remains a policy option. This fallback posture is framed not as the preferred path, but as a necessary safeguard to protect national unity and deter provocations.

Turning to the U.S. perspective, Jie describes an evolution from cautious management to more overt strategic competition. During the Cold War and post–Cold War periods, the United States pursued a dual deterrence strategy designed to prevent unilateral moves by either Beijing or Taipei. Through “strategic ambiguity,” Washington sought to dissuade the mainland from using force and Taiwan from pursuing independence. However, Jie argues that in the post-2018 environment, this balance has eroded. Both the Trump and Biden administrations are viewed as shifting toward “single deterrence” focused on China, while strengthening political and security ties with Taiwan to unprecedented levels.

From the Chinese perspective, the United States is increasingly seen as using Taiwan as a strategic asset in broader competition with China. Actions such as high-profile transits,

regularized arms sales, and military training are interpreted as evidence that Washington has abandoned the spirit of past agreements. Even as U.S. officials reassert a commitment to the One China policy, their actions are seen as signaling support for permanent separation. Jie contends that the U.S. preference may be for indefinite separation, even if peaceful reunification were possible.

In sum, Jie frames the Taiwan issue as a test of competing historical narratives and strategic priorities. China sees reunification as essential to its national project and political legitimacy. The United States, while nominally agnostic, is viewed as increasingly opposed to any outcome that enhances Chinese power. The challenge, Jie concludes, is that both sides now assume worst-case scenarios while insisting on incompatible end states. Yet he holds out the possibility that a shared interest in avoiding catastrophic conflict may still create space for managing the issue—if both sides exercise restraint, reaffirm their red lines, and sustain diplomatic channels. The Taiwan issue, in this view, remains deeply fraught, but not yet beyond the possibility of stabilization.

Assessment Summaries: South China Sea

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea are second only to the Taiwan issue in the risk of larger crisis and conflict that they pose in the U.S.-China relationship. These issues also draw in third parties—other claimants to South China Sea territories as well as trading nations concerned with the security of maritime transit—in ways that complicate the issue.

The U.S. Perspective

Tensions in the South China Sea have steadily escalated since 2009, when China first formally asserted its nine-dash line as a maritime boundary in reaction to Vietnam and Malaysia's submissions of extended continental shelf claims. Gregory B. Poling of the Center for Strategic and International Studies frames this period as the beginning of China's transformation from a status quo actor to one pursuing expansive territorial and maritime rights through coercive means. Over time, Beijing has leveraged its growing naval and coast guard capabilities to assert effective control over nearly all disputed areas, transforming what were once ambiguous maritime spaces into zones of unilateral Chinese administration. The result has been the collapse of earlier hopes for diplomatic compromise and a sharp shift in how the United States prioritizes the South China Sea in its broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

From the U.S. perspective, the South China Sea touches on two enduring national interests: the maintenance of freedom of navigation and the preservation of a stable regional order underpinned by credible alliance commitments. The United States has long refused to take a position on the legal merits of sovereignty disputes, but it has consistently opposed excessive maritime claims—especially those not derived from international law. What began as broad support for the principle of maritime freedom has become increasingly specific, particularly as

Beijing's assertions of "historic rights" have challenged both the spirit and letter of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). U.S. statements, including the 2020 Maritime Claims Position Paper and the 2022 Limits in the Seas study, have grown more explicit in rejecting China's legal rationale. By backing the 2016 arbitral ruling in favor of the Philippines and by codifying objections to Beijing's maritime conduct, the United States has shifted from passive concern to active legal opposition.

The second core U.S. interest—regional stability secured through credible alliances—has become inextricably linked to the first. As Chinese actions increasingly targeted the Philippines, Washington was forced to reassert the scope of its treaty obligations. The U.S.-Philippines alliance, long shaped by both legal commitments and political ambiguity, has become more vital in recent years. The strategic logic is clear: Without assured access to Philippine territory, the United States cannot credibly project power or deter aggression in the South China Sea. And without reliable American support, the Philippines is unlikely to permit such access. This interdependence has shaped successive efforts to strengthen the alliance, from the Visiting Forces Agreement in the late 1990s to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and its expansion under the Marcos administration. U.S. military financing and joint training programs have increased accordingly.

Poling notes that Washington's approach to the South China Sea was historically reactive, characterized by low prioritization and episodic engagement. That began to change following China's large-scale island-building campaign between 2013 and 2016, which significantly altered the regional military balance. The construction and militarization of artificial islands equipped with runways, sensors, and naval facilities gave China continuous surveillance and rapid response capability across much of the sea. In response, U.S. policy became more deliberate and multifaceted. Freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) were routinized, surveillance increased, and formal diplomatic objections to Chinese claims were issued. The United States also expanded programs to build Southeast Asian maritime capacity, most notably through the Maritime Security Initiative, with the Philippines receiving the largest share of resources.

The logic of deterrence also figures prominently in Poling's analysis. He emphasizes that U.S. signaling around the applicability of the Mutual Defense Treaty—especially during confrontations such as the prolonged standoff at Second Thomas Shoal—has prevented escalation into overt military conflict. When a Filipino sailor was injured by Chinese forces in 2024, Washington's clear red lines helped induce Beijing to accept a provisional arrangement that temporarily stabilized the situation. Poling argues that continued U.S. reinforcement of its commitments is essential to prevent fatal miscalculations.

China's approach to the South China Sea, as Poling describes it, has evolved from asserting legal claims to enforcing de facto control through paramilitary coercion. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the South China Sea has become closely tied to China's broader narrative of national rejuvenation. Chinese leaders have shifted from ambiguous claims to explicit assertions of

“historic rights” that extend beyond what is permitted under UNCLOS. While these claims may serve practical ends (such as fisheries protection or energy development), they are primarily driven by political and ideological imperatives. The South China Sea is now embedded in China’s national mythmaking, and compromise is politically costly.

Poling emphasizes that Beijing’s actions, while aggressive, have remained carefully calibrated. China has consistently used nonlethal coercion—ramming, water cannons, and maritime blockades—while avoiding direct military confrontation. These so-called “gray zone” tactics have enabled China to erode the status quo without triggering war. For several years, these tactics were highly effective. Southeast Asian claimants, including Vietnam and the Philippines, often backed down in the face of sustained pressure. But since 2021, this dynamic has begun to shift. Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and especially the Philippines have shown greater resilience, refusing to abandon oil exploration or enforcement actions in their own exclusive economic zones (EEZs).

Nevertheless, the risk of accidental escalation remains high. The increasing number of vessels and the rising intensity of confrontations make the likelihood of a fatal incident a matter of probability. Poling warns that such an event, particularly involving the Philippines, could rapidly escalate and draw in the United States. The deterrent function of U.S. presence, therefore, must be matched by crisis management and efforts to prevent such incidents in the first place.

Finally, Poling outlines the long-term vision embedded in U.S. policy: a multilateral maritime governance regime that would manage fisheries, allow for joint resource development, and institutionalize peaceful dispute resolution. Such a regime would not necessarily require China to renounce all its claims but would demand a significant recalibration of how it pursues them. On the bilateral front, the United States seeks agreements with China on military conduct in the EEZ and on innocent passage, although it remains wary of any deal that would exclude Southeast Asian claimants or undermine regional legal norms. Poling is skeptical of Beijing’s willingness to engage in meaningful compromise at this time, but he underscores the importance of maintaining international pressure and preparing the conditions for a future political opening.

The Chinese Perspective

China’s strategy in the South China Sea is rooted in a blend of sovereignty claims, security imperatives, and long-term development interests. Feng Zhang, who as of this writing was a visiting scholar at Yale Law School’s Paul Tsai China Center, offers a Chinese perspective structured around this tripartite framework, tracing its evolution from the Hu Jintao era and highlighting its continued relevance under Xi Jinping. He argues that China’s approach is best understood not as expansionist but as rooted in a multidimensional strategy to become a “strong maritime power,” a goal framed in both material and symbolic terms. China’s behavior, he contends, is shaped by the interaction of rising national capabilities, the normative framework of UNCLOS, and ongoing policy friction with regional actors and the United States.

Sovereignty is treated as the most politically sensitive and symbolically potent of China's interests. Zhang highlights how Chinese claims have evolved through ten major government statements since 1958, culminating in the comprehensive 2016 post-arbitration statement that reasserted China's claims to sovereignty over all South China Sea islands, maritime zones derived from those islands, and unspecified "historic rights." Notably, while previous statements included the nine-dash line map, it has been largely absent from official pronouncements since 2009. Zhang interprets this omission as a possible signal of reduced emphasis on the map as a legal basis for claims—though ambiguity remains. He also notes a rhetorical shift in official language from "indisputable sovereignty" to simply "sovereignty," which may imply growing policy flexibility.

Importantly, Zhang differentiates between the substantive and political functions of sovereignty claims. Substantively, he argues that China is more concerned with avoiding perceived losses than reclaiming new territory. Politically, sovereignty is deeply entangled with the legitimacy of the Communist Party and China's modern national identity, rooted in the narrative of overcoming the "century of humiliation." Reasserting sovereignty is thus framed not only as a matter of territorial integrity but as a marker of China's return to great-power status. This framing constrains the government's ability to show flexibility in sovereignty disputes without appearing to compromise on core national interests.

Security is the second pillar of Chinese interest in the South China Sea, and Zhang describes it as materially significant and strongly institutionalized in Chinese strategy. Beijing views the South China Sea as a core security perimeter necessary for protecting its coastal provinces, defending sea lines of communication, and enabling strategic deterrence. He details the evolution of Chinese military presence in the region, starting with early PLA Navy operations in the 1950s, through the 1974 and 1988 naval clashes, and culminating in the large-scale island-building campaign between 2013 and 2016. These militarized developments are closely tied to three security concerns: establishing a reliable bastion for sea-based nuclear deterrence, supporting Taiwan contingency planning by pre-positioning forces, and securing maritime energy imports and commercial shipping routes.

Zhang emphasizes that, from China's perspective, these efforts are defensive in nature. However, he acknowledges that the cumulative effect has been to shift the military balance and challenge the U.S. perception of open access and maritime dominance. China's creation of a "security perimeter" via artificial islands and enhanced naval presence is seen in Washington as an attempt to unilaterally change the status quo. From the Chinese side, these moves are presented as necessary adjustments to an increasingly contested environment.

Development constitutes the third category of China's interests in the South China Sea, though it has generally played a subordinate role compared to sovereignty and security. While China has long recognized the presence of oil, gas, and fisheries in the region, Zhang argues that material incentives alone cannot explain China's behavior. He notes that commercially viable resources are limited and that the risks and costs of unilateral exploitation in disputed areas often

outweigh the benefits. Nonetheless, resource considerations remain part of the broader narrative used to justify a long-term presence and reinforce sovereignty claims. Developmental interests were especially prominent during the 1980s and 1990s but have since receded in relative importance as security and strategic rivalry with the United States intensified.

Zhang also explores the possibility of China establishing a sphere of influence in the South China Sea—not necessarily through formal hegemony but via dominant influence and informal authority. While Beijing denies such ambitions, its actions suggest an interest in shaping regional order through a combination of status assertion, maritime presence, and normative erosion. He observes that China has already achieved widespread recognition as a great power in the region, but its bid for regional authority remains constrained by a lack of legitimacy and competing legal norms, particularly UNCLOS. China’s maritime behavior has begun to erode the normative weight of UNCLOS, and Zhang cautions that Beijing may seek to establish parallel frameworks that reflect its own values and interpretations of international law.

In his paper, Zhang further outlines three areas of U.S.-China conflict: sovereignty disputes involving U.S. allies (particularly the Philippines), freedom of the seas and EEZ interpretations, and regional leadership. In each, Zhang highlights how misaligned interpretations and mutual suspicion have intensified rivalry. While both sides remain committed to crisis management mechanisms, these tools have been underutilized in recent years. Tensions over U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance ISR operations in China’s EEZs and the deployment of offensive U.S. assets near Chinese-held features remain flashpoints. At the same time, Zhang points to the potential for deescalation through reciprocal restraint and confidence-building measures.

Overall, Zhang’s paper presents China’s South China Sea strategy as motivated more by the consolidation of its status and the management of perceived insecurities than by expansionist ambition. Yet the cumulative effect of its actions, and the domestic political imperatives driving its maritime posture, make the dispute a persistent source of strategic tension with the United States. Zhang suggests that only by acknowledging and accommodating each other’s core interests, particularly around deterrence and status, can Washington and Beijing avoid crisis and stabilize the region over the long term.

Assessment Summaries: Science and Technology Competition

The contest for science and technology leadership has become arguably the most prominent long-term element of the U.S.-China rivalry. Each side believes that mastery of the scientific and technological frontiers is indispensable to national power. Each is seeking to bolster its own standing and, in some cases, hamper the progress of its rival. This dynamic is intensifying zero-sum perceptions on both sides and creating the risk of a growing bifurcation of U.S. and Chinese scientific and technological research and advancement.

The U.S. Perspective

Michael Mazarr and Gregory Fauerbach note that the competition between the United States and China in science and technology is increasingly viewed as a defining feature of their broader strategic rivalry. U.S. officials and analysts have come to treat technological leadership as central to economic dynamism, military power, and global influence. This framing reflects growing alarm over China's rapid technological advances, many of which have been achieved through assertive state policies, including large-scale industrial subsidies, forced technology transfer, and intellectual property theft. From Washington's perspective, the speed and scope of Chinese progress in critical sectors—ranging from semiconductors to AI—raise the stakes of the rivalry, with some commentators likening the moment to a series of concurrent “Sputnik” shocks. The resulting sense of urgency has permeated U.S. strategic documents and rhetoric, which now portray science and technology competition not as a discrete issue but as a foundational component of the entire U.S.-China relationship.

Despite this growing consensus on the importance of technological leadership, U.S. objectives in the competition remain relatively underdefined. High-level strategies from both the Trump and Biden administrations have stressed the need to maintain U.S. advantages in emerging technologies but have offered few precise metrics for success. The United States has expressed a clear desire to stay ahead in critical areas such as AI and quantum computing, but often without articulating the scope or duration of that lead. Similarly, official documents point to various Chinese actions—such as the theft of intellectual property or the promotion of authoritarian digital norms—as threats, yet U.S. policy responses frequently rely on implicit assumptions rather than a formal theory of technological statecraft. As a result, much of U.S. strategy has taken the form of reactive containment rather than proactive goal setting.

At the heart of the U.S. approach is a growing belief that success in this arena is essential not only for maintaining national security but also for preserving liberal democratic governance. U.S. officials increasingly see China's technological ambitions as embedded within a larger project to reshape global standards and exert political influence. The United States has responded by attempting to blunt China's rise in key areas—most notably through export controls on advanced semiconductors and associated tools, as well as restrictions on outbound investment and collaboration. While these tools aim to slow Chinese progress, they also reflect deeper concerns that the existing frameworks for competition are inadequate in light of the scale and coherence of China's strategy.

Compounding these challenges is the fragmented and sometimes contradictory nature of U.S. technology policy. Three broad pillars define the current strategy: restricting Chinese access to critical technologies, investing in domestic innovation (as exemplified by the CHIPS and Science Act), and building international coalitions to manage emerging tech risks and promote shared standards. Each pillar, however, faces its own constraints. Export controls and investment restrictions have met with pushback from allies and industry partners. Domestic industrial policy

remains underfunded relative to the scale of the Chinese effort and often lacks coordination. And while alliance-based cooperation has expanded, divergent interests among partners complicate efforts to develop unified strategies, especially in politically sensitive sectors such as telecommunications and AI.

The lack of a clear theory of success further hinders U.S. policy. Policymakers have yet to articulate what an acceptable end state in the technology competition might look like, or how different objectives—such as innovation, security, and economic openness—should be balanced. In the absence of such a framework, the competition risks becoming unbounded. The current trajectory implies a push not only to stay ahead in innovation but also to prevent China from achieving parity in a wide array of technological domains. This perceived effort to constrain China’s development is viewed in Beijing as an existential threat, thereby reinforcing the intensity of the rivalry and narrowing the space for cooperation.

In their paper, Mazarr and Fauerbach also survey how Chinese officials define the stakes. In China, technological leadership is framed as essential to national rejuvenation and as a core component of state legitimacy. Strategic documents and political rhetoric consistently place science and technology at the center of long-term development goals. This orientation is grounded in a national project mindset that combines state-led investment, industrial policy, and normative ambition. Concepts such as “new quality productive forces” and “digital sovereignty” signal China’s determination not only to master emerging technologies but also to shape the global standards and political values associated with them. Beijing’s approach draws on deep traditions in Marxist and developmentalist thought, reinforcing the view that technological advancement is a tool of both domestic modernization and international influence.

The nature of China’s strategy—state-led, well-funded, and ideologically driven—presents particular challenges for U.S. policy. Whereas the U.S. relies on market mechanisms, private-sector innovation, and regulatory tools, China’s model is built around top-down coordination, long-term planning, and the mobilization of national resources. This asymmetry limits the scope for reciprocal arrangements or mutual restraint. Even where overlapping interests might exist (for example, in AI safety or biotechnology standards), suspicion and strategic competition limit the viability of cooperative frameworks. As Mazarr and Fauerbach note, U.S. and Chinese views of the competition differ not only in intensity but also in kind, with one side seeing technology as a domain of decentralized innovation and the other as a pillar of statecraft.

Ultimately, Mazarr and Fauerbach’s paper suggests that the United States must succeed in this competition by drawing on long-term strengths, such as openness, entrepreneurial capacity, and institutional resilience. Export controls and defensive measures may buy time, but sustained advantage will depend on the country’s ability to out-innovate over decades. Yet even this will be insufficient without a more coherent vision of the competitive landscape. Without clarity on objectives and thresholds, U.S. efforts risk becoming diffuse or counterproductive.

The Chinese Perspective

Technology competition has become a defining front in U.S.-China rivalry, shaping the balance of power, economic security, and global standards. Lu Chuanying presents a Chinese perspective on this contest, portraying China's actions as largely reactive to U.S. containment efforts and motivated by a drive for greater self-reliance. He emphasizes that China did not initially perceive itself as a challenger to U.S. technological primacy. Before the deterioration of bilateral relations, Chinese policy and academic discourse typically treated technology as one of many national capabilities rather than an autonomous domain of strategic rivalry. China's approach was shaped by a preference for integration into global innovation networks, combining selective independent development with open cooperation. In this view, China's rise in technology was not intended to displace the United States, but rather to strengthen domestic capabilities and reduce external vulnerabilities—particularly in light of perceived technological suppression by Washington.

Lu argues that U.S. assumptions about China's ambitions—particularly that Beijing seeks to dominate emerging frontier technologies—misrepresent the motivations behind Chinese policy. Instead of striving for global supremacy, China's leaders have been largely reactive, compelled by a belief that the United States has politicized technological issues and weaponized economic tools, such as export controls and investment restrictions. In this framing, the U.S. response to Chinese tech development is less a response to objective capabilities than an attempt to reassert geopolitical dominance in the face of perceived decline. Events such as the Huawei sanctions, the detention of Meng Wanzhou, and the FBI's "China Initiative" are seen by Chinese observers as signals that technological competition is not a temporary phase but a central and enduring feature of U.S. grand strategy.

This new environment has driven a decisive shift in China's national approach to science and technology. Whereas prior industrial planning often struck a balance between global openness and domestic development, recent U.S. actions have elevated self-reliance as a core strategic imperative. The 20th Party Congress marked this transition by explicitly elevating technology, education, and talent as foundational to China's future development. The goal is not to decouple entirely from the global system but to build enough indigenous capacity to reduce strategic dependence and to create leverage in future negotiations. Lu highlights that while China acknowledges its technological shortfalls, especially in foundational innovation, the experience of being targeted by U.S. restrictions has generated new political momentum for reforms and strategic investments—particularly in sectors such as semiconductors, photolithography, quantum computing, AI, and blockchain.

China's response to these pressures is structured around three goals: closing gaps in basic innovation, establishing independent technological ecosystems in key sectors, and achieving parity in digital technologies. This is exemplified by such efforts as the \$50 billion "National Fund III" to support the semiconductor sector, the expansion of domestic photolithography

capacity, and advances in AI models such as DeepSeek. The aim is not necessarily global dominance, but “suboptimal substitution” strategies that enable China to function under sanctions. In several areas (such as 5G and digital currency infrastructure) China claims comparative advantage. Huawei, for instance, holds a leading share of 5G patents and continues to dominate global base station deployment. In AI and blockchain, Chinese firms have embraced open-source ecosystems that promote global interoperability while ensuring data security and strategic autonomy.

Lu also outlines three critical factors shaping China’s capacity for long-term success: abilities, capabilities, and capacity. “Abilities” refers to scale-driven assets (data, market size, and talent) that support innovation. “Capabilities” reflects the country’s ability to adopt and apply emerging technologies across sectors. “Capacity” denotes strategic foresight and state coordination. China, he argues, is well-positioned in all three areas, though still constrained by limited access to high-end technologies due to export controls and embargoes. These constraints have accelerated the domestic innovation agenda but also created long-term risks if the technology decoupling persists.

On the U.S. side, Lu presents a view shaped by skepticism and critique. He suggests that the United States seeks to maintain its lead in frontier technologies by impeding China’s progress, not merely through competition but through structural containment. U.S. policies—particularly the “small yard, high fence” approach—are interpreted as designed to suppress China’s technological confidence and forestall systemic catch-up. Domestically, Lu argues, the U.S. uses the China threat as a mobilizing force to resolve internal weaknesses: reliance on foreign talent, declining industrial capabilities, and policy fragmentation. In this view, the competition with China serves to reinvigorate domestic industrial policy and reassert state influence over private tech firms.

Lu cautions that the U.S. strategy of prioritizing national security and geopolitical interests over technological cooperation may hinder its own scientific and technological progress. He argues that innovation thrives in competitive, open environments, not under monopolistic control, and that efforts to suppress China’s development are unlikely to succeed. Instead, such pressure may motivate China to accelerate its domestic innovation agenda, enhance its talent base, and strengthen its scientific infrastructure. Lu further emphasizes that the digital technology ecosystem is increasingly shaped by open-source development and global collaboration, making complete decoupling difficult and counterproductive. China’s long-term approach, he suggests, is to remain engaged in global technological networks while building safeguards against exclusion.

Lu concludes his paper by emphasizing that the U.S.-China technology competition extends beyond military applications to encompass a wide range of digital domains, including social media, cloud services, and mobile platforms. Lu argues that, despite the difficulty of cooperation under current conditions, mutual understanding of the nature of digital technologies, their development trajectories, and the boundaries of digital security is essential for long-term

stability. He warns that without shared frameworks or communication mechanisms, the rivalry will likely intensify and remain vulnerable to misperception and unmanaged escalation.

Review of Stabilization Proposals

Building on those understandings of U.S. and Chinese perspectives on Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the scientific and technology competition, we sought to assemble possible steps toward stabilization on these issues and to some degree more broadly in the relationship. One possible framework for thinking about such proposals was proposed by Zhang and Lebow in 2020 and refers to steps in the areas of deterrence, reassurance, and diplomacy.¹⁹⁶ We do not formally organize the proposals below into these categories. But we had them firmly in mind when conceptualizing the kinds of actions that could be useful.

We stress that the agenda outlined below aims to serve the larger concept described in this report: Stabilizing a dangerous rivalry that may be entering its most volatile period in many decades. The goal is not to transcend the rivalry or achieve a more profound and lasting form of coexistence, which we do not believe is possible at the present time. The steps proposed below for each issue are divided into three categories. The first is high-level political and strategic signaling and dialogue to break out of the structural dynamic of an escalating zero-sum rivalry. The second is near-term steps, which in all cases are relatively small because of tight constraints on the feasible but can be symbolically important. The third category is bolder options that could emerge based on changing circumstances and the actions of the other side, when each side is ready for bolder moves. Together, these three types of proposals can represent a road map to stabilization over time, from the political level to the operational level.

Taiwan

Stabilizing the Taiwan issue faces several constraints. As revealed by the workshop discussion with all the paper authors, a fundamental challenge to stabilization is the different interpretations of what the meaning of a status quo for Taiwan is. For the United States, the status quo, though not explicitly defined, tends to be envisioned as static. Recently, for example, in response to China's military exercise near Taiwan, the U.S. State Department broadly advocated for "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" and opposed "unilateral changes to the status quo, including through force or coercion."¹⁹⁷ For China, however, the status quo is inherently dynamic because it should be moving toward its ultimate goal of "complete

¹⁹⁶ Feng Zhang and Richard Ned Lebow, *Taming Sino-American Rivalry*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹⁹⁷ Tammy Bruce, "Response to China's Military Exercise Near Taiwan," U.S. Department of State, April 1, 2025.

reunification.”¹⁹⁸ This creates a complication for any effort to stabilize current tensions because the parties ultimately do not view the status quo in the same way.

Another complicating factor is the inability to completely control the actions of various stakeholders on this issue. For example, the executive branch of the United States cannot control the activities of members of Congress who choose to make proclamations about the Taiwan issue and make official visits to Taiwan, which the PRC often views as provocative. Additionally, the United States does not have control over the activities of Taiwan’s leaders. During the workshop, several participants noted that perspectives within China frequently overestimate the level of control the United States has over its own government and Taiwan. This misperception contributes to beliefs on the part of China that the U.S. executive branch is intentionally endorsing activities by these parties. Stabilization efforts thus must take into consideration and plan for elements that the United States cannot fully control. In addition, the United States must also manage perceptions of PRC leaders on what is within and not within its power.

Both Rorry Daniels and Jie Dalei offered specific proposals for stabilizing the rivalry on this issue. Table 4.1 catalogues leading suggestions for stabilization of the Taiwan issue found in our literature review of both U.S. and Chinese studies and essays. These fall into five primary categories. As the table indicates, the conception of useful steps in each category differs slightly between U.S. and Chinese assessments. In our proposals below, we have drawn on the ideas from both of those papers and the literature review.

Table 4.1. Summary of Taiwan Stabilization Proposals from Literature Review

Theme	U.S. Proposals	Chinese Proposals
Strategic framing	Return to strategic ambiguity; avoid statements implying support for independence	Reaffirm One China policy; avoid strategic clarity and analogies with Ukraine
Crisis management	Build joint manuals, crisis comms, and working groups	Restore military dialogues; build air/sea encounter protocols
Confidence-building	Expand Track 1.5/2, congressional exchanges, military-to-military contact	Institutionalize crisis channels and hotlines
Legal/diplomatic tools	Avoid provocative gestures; emphasize peaceful status quo	Reinforce mutual benefits of past cooperation
Economic/strategic tools	Strengthen Taiwan’s economic resilience; signal reputational costs	Depoliticize trade; stress historical cooperation

We gathered the study authors and other RAND experts at a workshop to discuss these possibilities in May of 2025. That discussion provided insight on the potential of these various options and helped surface new ideas.

¹⁹⁸ Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper: The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era,” August 10, 2022.

Drawing on our overall understanding of the challenge of stabilizing great-power rivalries, the authors' assessments of the Taiwan issue, options generated by the literature review, the workshop discussion, and our resulting assessment, we developed a theory of success for stabilizing the U.S.-China confrontation over Taiwan. That theory is based on the following assumptions:

- The status of Taiwan and the risks of the issue to the U.S.-China rivalry is primarily a political issue. The status of the military balance is an important component in shaping Chinese perceptions. Ultimately, however, Beijing's choices will be based on political-strategic factors, and creating an equilibrium of peace must be grounded first and foremost in political assurances from both sides.
- The CCP is determined to achieve unification with Taiwan. However, the timetable for that unification remains flexible and is not tied to any arbitrary dates.
- The biggest risks of crisis and war in the near term stem from two sources: (1) highly provocative statements or actions by China, the United States, or Taiwan that breach existing thresholds of stability and (2) the potential for unintended crises stemming from mutual military operations around Taiwan.
- Notwithstanding those assumptions, continuing to confront Beijing with the prospect of an exceptionally difficult campaign, including the possibility of an outright failure—in part through U.S. and especially Taiwanese military advances—can continue to serve an important role in stabilizing the dispute.

Given these assumptions, one plausible theory of success can be summarized as creating the maximum incentive for Beijing to pursue gradual approaches to realizing its ultimate goal. Under such a theory, the focus of short- and medium-term stabilization efforts must be to (1) keep the prospect of war as hazardous and uncertain as possible for China, (2) avoid obvious provocations that would force Beijing's hand, (3) generate as many political reassurances as possible to leave Beijing comfortable with a patient approach, (4) reduce the risks of unplanned military confrontations or accidents, and (5) create political and military mechanisms of communication to address ongoing disagreements and crisis dangers.

The elements outlined in this theory of success for the Taiwan issue align with the principles of the broader stabilization framework presented in Chapter 2. Making war as hazardous and uncertain as possible for China presents the real prospect of war between the two countries. Such a prospect not only provides a deterrent effect but also creates the conditions under which both sides can recognize the necessity of a *modus vivendi*, since neither side seeks to become involved in a conflict in which the potential for mutual destruction is a desired option. The principle of restraint is reflected in avoiding provocations that would force a response from Beijing and providing political reassurances, so Beijing is comfortable with a patient approach. Reducing the risks of unplanned military confrontations and creating avenues for crisis management directly tie into the overarching principle of establishing mechanisms and institutions to moderate a stable equilibrium. Using that theory of success as a guide, we propose ideas in three categories to help stabilize the U.S.-China rivalry on the Taiwan issue: political statements and

reassurances, short-term measures, and bolder steps for later implementation. Because the Taiwan issue is fundamentally political, implementing the recommendations in the first category may be essential to facilitating the actions outlined in the other two categories.

In the area of broad political and strategic signaling, we offer the following three suggestions:

1. *The United States and China should exchange a mutual set of signals designed to build confidence that neither side harbors an intent to radically overturn the status quo in the near future.* This step would include mutual statements of visions required to avoid conflict, as well as agreements on broad principles of stability on the issue to which each side commits. Examples could include U.S. statements that it does not support Taiwan independence, seek a permanent separation across the Straits, or oppose peaceful unification. China could reaffirm that peaceful reunification is the preferred approach, describe persuasive ways that could happen, and clarify that the use of force is only an option under the most extreme circumstances stipulated in the Anti-Secession Law. Such initiatives could be reflected in leader-to-leader meetings with coordinated language. Both sides sometimes issue such statements, but as part of a concerted effort at stabilization, fresh, strong, coordinated statements from each side could have some added value.
2. *Both sides could work to sustain a strong, ongoing dialogue between high-level officials on the Taiwan issue to avoid surprises.* Building on the messaging involved in the first suggestion, the United States and China could establish a regular dialogue on the issue involving senior officials to communicate concerns and help avoid crisis-generating surprises. For example, the United States and China could seek to increase the transparency of each other's moves, informing the other side about upcoming military maneuvering, arms sales, or major policy announcements to avoid surprises. An example of this type of exchange occurred during the Biden administration, during which the U.S. National Security Advisor and the PRC Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs met regularly.¹⁹⁹
3. *Each side—in the U.S. case in cooperation with allies and partners—should continue to reinforce deterrence of destabilizing actions.* China can do this by clearly articulating its red lines in terms of statements and actions by the United States and Taiwan and specifying the type of responses crossing such red lines may elicit.²⁰⁰ The

¹⁹⁹ Tausche and Waldenberg, “Sullivan to China Next Week, Sources Say, as US Works to Manage Bilateral Relationship.”

²⁰⁰ In addition to its positions articulated in its 2005 Anti-Secession Law and 2022 White Paper on Taiwan, the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office regularly issues statements reacting to activities and statements of Taiwan and the United States. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also regularly makes statements aimed at the United States regarding its activities and statements regarding Taiwan. These statements also are at times issued in tandem with military activities in response to activities that China sometimes identifies as red lines: the August 2022 visit to Taiwan by U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi was an example of this. The visit was preceded by strong official statements condemning the visit and official media outlets claiming that the United States would be crossing a “redline” with the visit. In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that China would “definitely take resolute and forceful measures” if Pelosi went through with the visit. However, how China would exactly respond remained unclear until shortly after Pelosi landed in Taiwan. The visit was followed by additional strongly worded

United States can continue to work with others to send multilateral signals that outright aggression, or extreme coercive moves such as blockades and quarantines, will cause China to become an international pariah.²⁰¹

If the political reassurances proposed in the first category are sufficient for Beijing and Washington, there are some steps that could be achieved in the short term:

1. *Empower a Track 2 process connected to high-level officials and military leaders that addresses strategic- and operational-level issues, while serving as a reliable backchannel for official communications in case formal channels break down.* Official communications on the Taiwan issue between the United States and China are restrained by official policy positions. A series of Track 2 dialogues could thus generate more understanding and potential solutions between the United States and China on the issue that would not be possible through official interactions. The Track 2 dialogues could consist of different series that tackle different types of issues: high-level strategic-level issues as well as day-to-day operational issues, such as crisis communications. The high-level strategic issues series could discuss some of the challenges identified above, such as defining commonly used but vague terms, including like *status quo* and *peaceful unification*, and providing additional clarity to red lines. The crisis communication dialogue series could generate new ideas for leveraging existing and creating new crisis communications channels. Track 2 dialogues are not a novel idea for this issue, but they have varied greatly in their ability to influence Track 1 (the official level). In order for these dialogues to be worthwhile, they would have to have clear connections and communication channels to high-level officials.²⁰² The high-level strategic dialogues would need ties to the top leaders of China and the United States and their close advisors on the issue. The operational-level dialogues would need to have channels to the PLA's Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission, the U.S. Department of Defense's Joint Chiefs of Staff, China's Eastern Theater Commander, and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Commander. These channels would not only act as a way to generate new understandings and test ideas but could also act as a backchannel for communications when official channels fail.
2. *The United States and China should maintain existing and seek new ways to strengthen military-to-military communications and crisis communications links.*

statements and military exercises. See "It's Time Washington Stopped Trying Beijing's Patience on Redline Issues: China Daily Editorial"; Rodgers et al., "China Warns of 'Forceful Measures' if Nancy Pelosi Visits Taiwan"; "Tsai Ing-wen, DPP Authorities to Push Taiwan into Disaster by Colluding with Foreign Forces: Spokesperson"; and Kwan, "China Begins Live-Fire Military Drills Around Taiwan."

²⁰¹ The United States and its allies have undertaken combined military operations and made statements both together and separately on the Taiwan issue. Trilateral defense meetings between Australia, Japan, and the United States, for example, have made statements supporting peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. The European Union passed a resolution that supported Taiwan's participation in multilateral organizations and portrayed China's "aggressive behaviors regarding Taiwan and South China Sea" as a "risk to regional and global security." See U.S. Department of Defense, "Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Defense Ministers' Meeting November 2024 Joint Statement" and European Parliament, "Resolution on the Misinterpretation of UN Resolution 2758 by the People's Republic of Taiwan and Its Continuous Military Provocations Around Taiwan."

²⁰² Kerrigan, Grek, and Mazarr, *The United States and China-Designing a Shared Future*, p. 32.

There are already military-to-military communications, protocols, and crisis communications channels in place.²⁰³ However, they often do not work, and the PRC has a tendency to cut them off in times of crisis.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, these channels should be maintained and further strengthened based on results from an effective Track 2 process. The United States has made several efforts to deepen such communication links without much success, but there may be reason to believe that officials in Beijing could see more value in them than before. It is certainly worth a strong renewed effort.

Finally, we offer one bolder option: *The United States could balance its commitments to Taiwan with leveraging its influence to ensure Taiwan's actions do not escalate tensions with China and destabilize cross-Strait security.* On the Taiwan issue, the United States “opposes unilateral changes to the status quo, including through force or coercion.”²⁰⁵ Although China’s military activities and rhetoric toward Taiwan increase tensions across the Strait, so can the activities of Taiwan’s leaders. Taiwan’s President Lai Ching-te, for example, has made numerous statements that have elicited harsh rhetoric and increased military activities by China. Such activities include asserting that Taiwan is a “sovereign, independent nation” and announcing measures to counter China’s influence and espionage, characterizing it as a “foreign hostile force.”²⁰⁶

Although the United States is not responsible for and cannot completely control the activities of Taiwan, it provides military support and de facto extended deterrence to Taiwan. Because of this, it has potential leverage over Taiwan to limit its activities that upset the status quo championed by the United States. The current administration has advocated increasing burden-sharing by allies and partners, and, in this case, part of that burden-sharing would be holding Taiwan responsible for maintaining cross-Strait peace and stability. To be clear, as iterated above, the United States should still make armed conflict over Taiwan as hazardous and uncertain as possible for China and adhere to its policy and legal commitments to Taiwan; at the same time, it should not allow Taiwan to take advantage of U.S. support by undertaking actions that could provoke China to undertake more aggressive actions. The amount of U.S. leverage over Taiwan is always constrained by political realities on the island, but Washington may now be in a position to convey limits to the support it will grant for certain statements or actions by Taiwanese officials.

²⁰³ Examples of existing frameworks for military-to-military communications and agreements include the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures, and the Memorandum of Understanding Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters. Crisis communications links that have been in place in recent decades include a leader-to-leader hotline, a Defense Telephone Link, and specific communication links for cyber and space issues.

²⁰⁴ “China Failing to Answer U.S. Crisis Line Call During Balloon Incident Highlights ‘Dangerous’ Communications Gap.”

²⁰⁵ Bruce, “Response to China’s Military Exercise Near Taiwan.”

²⁰⁶ Laie, “Inaugural Address of ROC 16th-Term President Lai Ching-te”; Buckley, “China’s Military Exercises Around Taiwan Enter Second Day.”

South China Sea

Stabilizing the South China Sea issue presents a set of interlocking constraints. As highlighted during the workshop discussion, this is not merely a legal or territorial dispute but a symbolic and strategic contest over status, legitimacy, and operational presence. Several participants emphasized that, from Beijing's perspective, the stakes are about more than sovereignty—they encompass national mythmaking and great-power identity. Symbolic assertions of sovereignty carry as much political weight as tangible control. For this reason, even small perceived slights or concessions can incur reputational costs that constrain diplomatic flexibility. Conversely, from the U.S. perspective, stability hinges on deterring Chinese coercion and upholding principles of maritime freedom, especially in defense of alliance commitments to the Philippines. These contrasting strategic narratives have hardened over time, making compromise on the terms of control or recognition increasingly difficult.

The persistence of “gray zone” tactics further complicates the picture. Beijing has deliberately relied on nonlethal coercion—including water cannoning, ramming, and maritime blockades—to assert control without crossing thresholds that would trigger U.S. military responses. This behavior has allowed for repeated escalation and deescalation cycles without formal resolution. Several participants noted that this pattern has made the status quo more stable and predictable than previously assumed but that it has also entrenched a dynamic in which unilateral restraint is politically difficult. China sees little incentive to de-escalate when its coercive tactics are yielding gains without war, and the United States is reluctant to reduce surveillance or naval operations for fear of signaling weakness to both Beijing and Manila.

A further structural challenge lies in the multilateral nature of the problem. The South China Sea dispute involves multiple sovereign claimants with overlapping maritime claims. For the United States, its treaty obligations to the Philippines introduce a particularly acute set of responsibilities. The Philippines is both a sovereign actor and a U.S. treaty ally—one whose independent actions can escalate or defuse crises, and whose cooperation is essential to any stabilization effort. Yet, from Beijing's perspective, Manila is often seen not as an autonomous actor but as a proxy of the United States, complicating attempts at bilateral management. The July 2024 provisional arrangement over Second Thomas Shoal was possible only because the Philippines demonstrated agency and restraint, quietly rejecting offers of joint resupply with the United States to maintain control of its own crisis-management approach. At the same time, China's growing distrust of Philippines intentions and its skepticism about U.S. commitments raises the risk of miscalculation.

Finally, workshop participants highlighted a broader impasse. Stabilization is made more difficult by the perception on both sides that initiative lies elsewhere. China believes it is acting within its rights, and thus sees little reason to alter course. The United States, in turn, sees no basis for unilateral concessions unless China first signals a willingness to compromise on its “historical rights” claims or military posture. The structural dilemma that neither side believes it

can or should move first permeates the discussion. And while creative ideas were offered, including the concept of symbolic recognition, provisional codes of conduct, and limited access arrangements, all would require an unusual degree of political will and coordination across the bureaucracies not currently disposed toward self-restraint.

Gregory Poling and Feng Zhang each offered thoughts on stabilizing the rivalry in this region. Table 4.2 summarizes ideas from the literature review of recent studies on U.S.-China relations that specifically examined this issue. These fall broadly into the same categories as the ideas offered by Poling and Zhang. We drew on all of those ideas in formulating the overarching set of proposals listed below.

Table 4.2. Summary of South China Sea Stabilization Proposals from Literature Review

Theme	U.S. Proposals	Chinese Proposals
Strategic framing	Maintain denial posture; avoid bloc dynamics	Clarify core/common interests; accept stable power balance
Crisis management	Revive MMCA; add digital deconfliction tools	Establish dedicated South China Sea mechanism; operationalize CUES
Confidence-building	Update memoranda of understanding; extend to uncrewed systems	Resume exchanges; avoid militarization; constrain third-party escalations
Legal/diplomatic tools	Ratify UNCLOS; support 2016 ruling; enable minilateralism	Prioritize ASEAN-led Code of Conduct or Declaration of Conduct; promote inclusive regional security model
Economic/strategic tools	Support Manila legally/diplomatically without military escalation	Promote joint development; launch trilateral projects; integrate ASEAN

Drawing on our overall understanding of the challenge of stabilizing great-power rivalries, the paper authors' assessments of the South China Sea issue, options generated by the literature review, the workshop discussion, and our resulting assessment, we developed a theory of success for stabilizing the U.S.-China confrontation on this issue. It is based on the following assumptions:

- China is determined to assert control over the South China Sea, though its exact objectives, end-state preferences, and timeline remain ambiguous.
- China views the U.S. role in the region as part of a larger, unjust effort to constrain Chinese power and impose U.S. control over its periphery. This perception partly explains its determination to exert greater influence over the region.
- The United States is fully committed to the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty, but its commitment is limited to responding to outright military action against Philippine territory, vessels, or personnel. China has been skillful in expanding its position through nonlethal “gray zone” tactics that fall below the threshold of armed conflict.
- Increased Chinese influence in the South China Sea would not threaten vital U.S. interests. However, the end to maritime freedom of movement throughout the region, subject to required Chinese approval, would undermine a global interest that is one of the longest-standing U.S. core interests.

- There is growing international consensus on the unacceptability of the use of force to resolve regional issues and the importance of maritime freedom of movement.
- Critical actors in Southeast Asia are unlikely to take a clear and unambiguous stand in any diplomatic coalition against China unless backed into a corner.

Based on these assumptions, one plausible theory of success would combine deterrence of military escalation with intensified multilateral and bilateral diplomacy to create a medium-term route to a peaceful solution as the default international process and expectation. Under such a theory, the focus of short- and medium-term stabilization efforts would be to (1) deter any claimants or other actors in the region from undertaking direct military aggression to achieve their goals, through a combination of military power and multilateral signaling; (2) discourage other claimants from taking provocative actions on secondary issues that would force Beijing's hand and produce crises; (3) initiate new processes of multilateral and bilateral diplomacy to create a default and required route to peaceful unification of disputes; (4) create new multilateral cooperative bodies on shared threats and issues, whether or not China will join them; and (5) rally broad-based international support for these processes, including signaling about the unacceptability of the use of force to resolve disputes or threaten free maritime transit.

This theory of success reflects the six principles of stabilization outlined in Chapter 2. The persistent effort to avoid military escalation, while managing crises at lower levels of intensity, reflects an implicit acceptance that each side's vital interests cannot be secured through total victory. The emphasis on shared operational tools and risk management measures illustrates the principle of institutionalized crisis moderation. Meanwhile, restraint is positioned as a precondition for returning to a stable equilibrium. Although political legitimacy and shared norms remain contested, the workshop discussion suggested that concrete steps toward incremental deescalation are still possible.

Using that theory of success as a guide, we developed ideas in all three categories: political statements and reassurances, short-term measures, and bolder steps for later implementation. In the area of broad political and strategic signaling, we suggest three steps:

1. *The United States and the Philippines can continue to clarify, in coordination, the specific types of Chinese actions that would invoke obligations under the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.* This should not be done unilaterally by Washington, but rather in close consultation with Manila to preserve alliance cohesion and avoid overcommitment. Quietly reinforcing mutual understanding of these thresholds may help prevent escalation and clarify the consequences of particularly dangerous incidents—such as the injury of Philippine personnel or attacks on public vessels. Importantly, red lines should not be expanded to cover broad categories of gray zone activity, where ambiguity may preserve valuable flexibility.
2. *Similarly, China can clarify its own red lines on very specific actions by the Philippines or other claimants that would require enhanced Chinese responses.* The critical ingredient to this action will be the limited scope of the Chinese demands: If they are dramatic and continue to escalate, it will appear to the United States and others that this avenue is being used as a cover to achieve larger Chinese objectives.

The United States can then work with allies and partners to engage in dialogues with Beijing about the character of its red lines and the scope for mutual accommodation.

3. *The United States and China could issue coordinated political statements that signal mutual intent to keep the South China Sea competition within defined parameters.* The credibility of such statements would depend on modest expectations, mutuality of commitments, and follow-through over time. These would include more explicit U.S. statements that it recognizes China's interests in maintaining security relative to foreign military presence, and Chinese commitments to respect the freedom of maritime passage. Once well established, such strategic messages could possibly provide the basis for operational restraint, though this would likely have to await a second phase of stabilization.

In the area of modest near-term steps, we propose three ideas:

1. *Strengthen mutual restraint between Beijing, Manila, and the United States over specific disputes around the Second Thomas Shoal, the Scarborough Shoal, and other features prone to incidents.* This can be built on mutual statements of actions that each side forswears outside extreme cases. Each side can contribute to this step through restraint in military activities, including selected limitations on patrols and navigation operations. China can show restraint by reducing or removing offensive capabilities on the Spratly Islands. It could further demonstrate good faith by opening up some of these islands to visits from U.S. and regional militaries. In parallel, the United States could reduce its military presence and ease Chinese threat perceptions by focusing on capacity-building efforts with regional states rather than deploying offensive and destabilizing capabilities of its own.
2. *Seek to develop a bilateral code of conduct for incidents in the region, building on the provisional agreement reached in July 2024.* This process could build on existing agreements including the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, the Memorandum of Understanding Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters, and the Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism. This effort can proceed alongside support for bilateral codes of conduct between China and other claimants drawing lessons from the 2024 provisional arrangement. These bilateral efforts should not be held hostage to ASEAN consensus but rather encouraged through parallel diplomatic channels and norms-building.
3. *Without scaling back legal or operational presence, the United States could selectively reduce the publicity surrounding certain ISR flights or FONOPs.* This would avoid undermining legal principles or alliance confidence while testing whether a less visible posture yields reciprocal restraint. For example, refraining from immediate press releases or media coverage following routine patrols could be used as a reversible confidence-building gesture if paired with Chinese moderation.

Finally, in the category of bolder ideas which can be developed for later possible implementation, we suggest two possibilities:

1. *China and the United States can modify their military doctrines and force structures to maintain a peaceful military relationship in the South China Sea.* Both sides can adopt a military strategy that combines defense and access, rather than one emphasizing

offense and control. While doctrinal change is difficult, credible signals such as force deployment patterns, operational narratives, or authoritative white paper language could demonstrate a strategic shift away from control-seeking behavior. Such efforts would require sustained dialogue and may only be viable under conditions of broader détente.

2. *The United States could signal privately that some ISR or FONOP activity might be open to negotiation, conditional on China shifting away from its maximalist historic rights claims or demonstrating flexibility in code of conduct negotiations.* A credible but conditional willingness to scale back the most visible elements of U.S. military signaling could serve as a valuable confidence-building measure, especially if sequenced alongside visible Chinese restraint. Care must be taken to avoid undermining the confidence of allies or weakening normative commitments to freedom of navigation.

Science and Technology Competition

Our effort to identify stabilizing measures for the U.S.-China contest in science and technology was complicated by several factors. First, this is a sprawling area with many different components, challenges, and interests rather than a unified geopolitical issue. Second, the competition is just emerging in its full form; both sides are rushing to strengthen their positions, and the contest is not necessarily mature enough to have produced a broad-based interest in stepping back from competing. Third, in areas of scientific research and technological development it is not always straightforward to identify actions that can ease the competition. Nonetheless, we sought to identify actions in all three categories noted above: broad-based political statements, near-term steps, and ideas for bolder actions that could be relevant when the relationship improves somewhat.

In the process, it became clear that it is not straightforward to define what a stable competition means in this domain. The domain of science and technology is constantly in flux, with both governments and private-sector actors seeking new advantages, trying in some cases to fully displace the products or systems in the marketplace. It is inherently a “revisionist” domain, in the terminology of international relations. From the standpoint of the bilateral relationship, we ended up conceiving of a stable competition in science and technology as one that does not embody such extreme, zero-sum, mutually destructive strategies and activities that would threaten the overall health of the relationship. For example, efforts to gain decisive advantage in a technology area with the stated purpose of imposing coercive control over the other side, or engaging in large-scale efforts to forcibly undermine the progress of the other side, would have dangerous implications for the overall relationship.

Mike Mazarr and Greg Fauerbach for the United States, and Chuanying Lu for China, offered sets of proposals for stabilizing the science and technology rivalry. We drew on those and general research on the area (though there are very few proposals so far to achieve such a goal in this area). Drawing on our overall understanding of the challenge of stabilizing great-power rivalries, the paper authors’ assessments of the science and technology competition, the

workshop discussion, and our resulting assessment, we developed a theory of success for stabilizing the U.S.-China contest over leadership in the frontiers of scientific and technological progress. This theory is based on the following assumptions:

- Scientific and technological progress and relative standing, unlike some other areas of the competition, is not inherently a zero-sum process.
- Ultimately, standing in this part of the rivalry will be a product of domestic dynamism and systemic strengths rather than direct efforts to undermine the other side's progress.
- U.S. and Chinese standing in science and technology is grounded to an important degree in advances in basic science which are globally shared and generally accessible. Trying to divide basic science into two rival camps is unnecessary, and ultimately counterproductive, for competitive standing.
- From the U.S. side, aspects of the American system ought to give U.S. leaders confidence that an open competition in which information and advances are broadly shared will benefit the United States, because of its better ability to integrate, diffuse, build on and perfect new advances.

The resulting theory of success can be described as managing the worst aspects of emerging technologies for mutual security and the condition of the rivalry while stepping back from the most extreme versions of efforts to undermine the other side's progress. Under such a theory, the focus of short- and medium-term stabilization efforts would be to (1) identify and mitigate a small number of the most dangerous possible competitive uses of emerging technologies, through a combination of deterrence and bilateral (or multilateral) agreements; (2) agree on limits to efforts to undermine the rival's scientific and technological progress; and (3) identify limited, nonthreatening areas where actual collaboration remains possible.

This theory of success reflects the six principles of stabilization outlined in Chapter 2 and reiterated above in several ways. It represents an effort, inherent in those principles, to signal a baseline desire for mutual respect and acceptance of the other side's vital interests, suggests that some eventual *modus vivendi* is critical to both sides, and reflects the idea that some equilibrium is important to both sides. It implies a need for norms and principles to keep the competition from getting out of control. And it suggests specific forms of restraint to allow stabilization.

Using that theory of success as a guide, we developed ideas in all three categories: Political statements and reassurances, short-term measures, and bolder steps for later implementation.

In the area of broad political and strategic signaling, we suggest two steps:

1. *The United States and China could offer general political reassurances about their intentions in this competition, combined with selected commitments on the limits of the competitive space.* These statements would involve, for example, U.S. pledges that it does not seek to retard China's general economic development, that it welcomes cooperation and trade in many high-tech areas, and that it will not impose constraints on the relationship in selected areas of science and technology. These could include coordinated statements from each government recognizing the existence of a competition in this area but committing to important forms of restraint, including limits on intellectual property theft, efforts to moderate disruptions in international

scientific exchanges, and limiting direct restrictions on technology sharing to the most essential domains.

2. *The United States and China could initiate Track 1.5 dialogues to expand mutual understanding on emerging areas of technology.* The goal would be to establish a forum in which mutual concerns could be raised, definitional issues discussed, and frameworks for assessing risk could be developed at broad-based political and strategic levels. Two issue-specific, dedicated channels of such an ongoing dialogue could focus on AI and biotechnology. In both cases, the United States and China could exchange information about their views of the technology areas, goals and objectives, and perceived risks. Track 2 dialogues on these issues have occurred, and nascent government-to-government discussions have taken place. This proposal would involve forums for government and nongovernment experts to share ideas more deeply, regularly, and with more research support than is currently the case. One goal of the dialogue would be to begin distinguishing between technologies with direct military applications and those with primarily civilian application, where some cooperation remains possible.

In the area of modest near-term steps, we propose four ideas:

1. *Both sides could make careful deterrent commitments to rule out the most destabilizing actions in this competition.* They could clarify that direct interference with critical science and technology assets in their homelands—including research labs, data centers, and semiconductor production facilities—would generate immediate and proportional responses. They could declare that efforts to steal proprietary AI model weights would be met with significant, proportional responses, and that attacks by the other side using AI, biotechnology, quantum technology, or other emerging capabilities would raise the prospect of asymmetric and disproportionate responses.
2. *Each side could make selected, reciprocal promises of restraint in the pursuit and use of specific technologies.* These could include limits on gain of function research on biology and the use of AI-empowered cyber capabilities in peacetime. The two sides could also formalize the agreement made between Presidents Biden and Xi not to use AI for the command and control of nuclear weapons. More boldly, they could work together on global commitments of restraint in such use, identifying moratoria on the employment of certain destabilizing technologies.
3. *The United States and China could attempt to deepen their dialogue on the trajectory and risks of AI, building on the single major intergovernmental dialogue held so far.* As more evidence accumulated of potential loss of control events, the two sides may begin to see more reason to hold a more regular and serious discussion of the issues. The time may be right to make another effort to significantly deepen the existing channel.
4. *The two sides could expand basic science collaboration under the U.S.-China Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement in areas of limited security concern.* This could include investments by both sides in joint basic science research in several carefully selected areas deemed to be of limited security concerns. One approach would be to define very specific areas of research within broad topics of global concern that hold little national security urgency and establish three or five-year agreements to allow cooperative research in those areas. These could provide

something like a mirror image of the growing lists of prohibited scientific and technology information sharing—designated areas, with clear criteria to judge them, in which collaboration would be encouraged.

5. The two sides could *seek greater cooperation in specific limited areas of non-threatening technology*, including an “AI for Good” initiative and collaboration in clean energy technology.

Finally, in the category of bolder ideas that can be developed for later possible implementation, we suggest two possibilities:

1. *Undertake deeper cooperation and development of mitigation measures for potential AI loss of control events.* Beyond the AI dialogue suggested above, the United States and China—perhaps in concert with several other countries leading the development of AI—could undertake more detailed and focused assessment of possible misalignment dangers, identifying specific loss-of-control events and how the two sides could collaborate in preserving state control of AI systems and avoiding the worst outcomes. This process could include joint scientific research from both or all sides. More elaborate and ambitious versions of the concept could include joint research and threat anticipation centers. It could include the creation of a Joint Warning Center—staffed also with experts from third countries—that would allow the United States and China to watch for dangerous AI events, and also to build limited international cooperative playbooks for responding to specific scenarios.
2. *Identify limited areas for a return to deep and regular U.S.-China collaboration in basic science, including joint research between U.S. and Chinese universities and exchanges of students and researchers.* This would build on the more limited, near-term search for areas of possible research noted above and aspire to a time when the constraints on mutual scientific collaboration are significantly eased. Such an effort would attempt to define a very broad range of areas of science where joint research is allowed and encouraged.

Conclusion

The agenda outlined above is certainly more than either the United States or China would be willing to embrace today. Especially given the intensity of current trade, security, and technology disputes, the potential for such a broad-based agenda of stabilization seems limited. Even if these steps were put into place, moreover, the overall trajectory of the relationship could continue to worsen, driven by other issues.

Even as the rivalry matures, however, both the United States and China will have strong motives to stabilize the competition. Both have strong incentives to avoid war and unintended escalation from local crises. Both would benefit from preserving some basic level of coexistence and even collaboration in specific areas. U.S. and Chinese security will be improved by mechanisms that improve communication, both in general and in crises.

Our goal in developing an agenda of stabilization was, as noted in Chapter 2, limited. We do not believe that collaborative coexistence is possible today. The United States and China are very far from even conceptualizing how their rivalry could end or be transcended. Nonetheless,

reducing the risk of crises, preventing unnecessary cascading of competitive moves, and preserving limited areas for positive coordination can benefit both sides. In that regard, the moves suggested here can have positive value in establishing the two preconditions for a stable rivalry: an agreed status quo and accepting the fundamental legitimacy of the other side in the contest.

Taken as a whole, the suggestions above suggest four primary areas in which initiatives could help stabilize the competition. The first is improving mutual dialogue and understanding on broad concepts in the competition, ranging from notions of mutual respect and the meaning of hegemony to views of the world being created by emerging technology. Misaligned understandings about such baseline ideas can threaten both essential components of a stable rivalry: a shared status quo (because there can be no coherent agreement about what one entails) and signals of mutual legitimacy (because misunderstood concepts push each side to legitimacy-denying levels of zero-sum competition). Better communication on essential concepts cannot stabilize the rivalry on its own, but it can build a stronger foundation for doing so over time.

A second general category of stabilization measures involves the use of moderate and targeted deterrent commitments to sustain existing bounds on the competition or establish new ones. Several of these were suggested above for each of the three main issue areas.

The third general category of initiative includes tangible forms of mutual restraint, either broadcast in statements by each side or arrived at through formal diplomacy, to offer reassurance and signal peaceful intent. The potential for such signals of restraint exists in all three issue areas we assessed, as noted above, ranging from military deescalation around Taiwan to limitations on coercive activities in the South China Sea to pledges of restraint in the use of selected emerging technologies.

Finally, the fourth category involves formalized mechanisms, structures, or agreements that signal acceptance of elements of a shared status quo. These would be the product of diplomatic negotiation and would in many cases build on existing bilateral or multilateral agreements. They could include everything from crisis communication channels to operating procedures for incidents in the air or at sea or limited treaties to regulate competing claims in the South China Sea. Because of the state of the relationship today, such formalized mechanisms will have to be precisely targeted and limited in their application. But they can still create important forms of reassurance and equilibrium against shocks in the rivalry.

No agenda of this kind will be embraced in its entirety. U.S. and Chinese officials interested in stabilizing their relationship could start with a small set of these ideas and build from there. They could do so even as the rivalry rages in other areas—just as the United States and Soviet Union did during the Cold War. This analysis suggests that the potential exists to improve the stability of this perilous rivalry—if both sides are interested.

Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
FONOP	freedom of navigation operation
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
MMCA	Maritime Military Consultative Agreement
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

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