



HARVARD Kennedy School
BELFER CENTER
FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

1st Step Opportunities for U.S.-China Actions to Reduce Nuclear Dangers

Matthew Bunn

Harvard Kennedy School, Managing the Atom

“Dialogue on U.S.-China Relations and Strategic Stability”

Shanghai, July 7-8, 2025

http://scholar.harvard.edu/matthew_bunn

1

Better U.S.-China relations would serve both sides' interests – and could happen

2

- ❑ Current tensions are high – and increase dangers, reduce opportunities for both
- ❑ Could see deals on tariffs, export controls, other issues in coming months
 - Trump clearly wants a deal
- ❑ Could be a Xi-Trump summit this year or early next
 - Trump has said he would travel to Beijing
- ❑ Summit statement on nuclear issues could provide foundation for further cooperation



Source: AFP

2

Track II dialogue can offer ideas to governments, increase chance of success

3

- ❑ For both sides, decision from the top needed to give “political cover” for officials to negotiate, make progress
- ❑ Track II dialogue, with its flexibility to explore, can develop ideas
 - Governments can accept or reject
- ❑ Has often been important in the history of nuclear arms control
 - Key ideas often discussed first in non-government channels
 - Has been way to find paths past obstacles in formal talks



Source: Global Times

3

Summit statement might offer 1st steps in several categories

4

- ❑ Broad U.S.-China relations
- ❑ Nuclear forces and policies
- ❑ Nonproliferation and nuclear security
- ❑ Risk reduction



Source: USINDOPACOM

4

I: Broad U.S.-China Relations

5

- ❑ Some broad points on principles of relations likely to be essential for nuclear-related progress
 - Might be dealt with in other statements, separate from a nuclear statement
- ❑ Principles might include commitments to:
 - Resolving issues peacefully, through dialogue
 - Respecting each other's core security interests
 - Avoiding any armed conflict, which would carry huge dangers
 - Avoiding nuclear war, which would be devastating for both
 - Wording might effectively acknowledge mutual vulnerability
 - "One China," peace in Taiwan strait, no support for Taiwan independence
- ❑ Many past examples in summit statements, accords

5

II: Nuclear forces and policies

6

- ❑ Agreement to begin broad strategic stability talks
 - Goal of agreeing on measures to avoid arms race, reduce risk, build confidence
- ❑ First use:
 - China recommits to no first use
 - U.S. commits to no first use "except as a last resort if necessary to protect the very existence and sovereignty of the United States or one of its allies or partners."
 - Neither side will use nuclear threats to threaten sovereignty or coerce the other
- ❑ Both will seek to limit and reduce nuclear forces
 - U.S. will seek accord with Russia to stay w/in New START limits
 - China sees New START limits as excessive, does not plan to build up beyond 1,000

6

II: Nuclear forces and policies (2)

7

- ☐ Will discuss “indissoluble relationship” between strategic defensive and strategic offensive forces
- ☐ U.S. commits not to deploy nuclear-armed ground-launched INF within range of China
- ☐ No interference with national technical means of verification
- ☐ No nuclear weapons in orbit or further testing of FOBS
- ☐ No basing strategic weapons abroad
- ☐ Call on other nuclear-armed states to also show nuclear restraint

7

III: Nonproliferation and nuclear security

8

- ☐ Reaffirm importance of NPT, nonproliferation cooperation
 - Also BWC, CWC
- ☐ Cooperation to find verifiable ways to prevent nuclear weapons in Iran
- ☐ Cooperation to build peace, reduce nuclear dangers, on Korean peninsula, build toward denuclearization
- ☐ No nuclear test explosions, expert discussions of confidence-building
- ☐ Support for FMCT, steps to ensure E&R plants prepared for eventual verification
- ☐ Cooperation on nuclear security best practices, effective nonproliferation export control implementation

8

IV: Risk reduction

9

- ☐ Reaffirm humans must make nuclear launch decisions
- ☐ Hotline to be manned 24/7, always answered
- ☐ Continue, expand mil-to-mil communication
- ☐ Missile test launch notification accord
- ☐ Accords similar to US-Russia “Prevention of Nuclear War” and “Dangerous Military Activities” agreements
- ☐ Strengthening efforts on avoiding, managing incidents at sea and over the seas
- ☐ Discussions to reduce the dangers of incidents, conflict in space – including issues of weapons in space, and weapons on ground, sea, or air that threaten space assets, “rules of the road”

9

Kennedy's lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis

10

- ☐ Avoid clashes that leave adversary no choice but humiliating retreat or nuclear war
 - But how to offer compromise credibly, in the heat of crisis or conflict?
- ☐ Military forces are large, difficult-to-control enterprises, creating a “fog of crisis” just as there is a “fog of war”
 - “There’s always one son-of-a-bitch who doesn’t get the word”



Source: JFK Library

10

Backup slides if needed...

11

11

We need risk-reduction action on each step on the pathway to nuclear war

12



- ☐ Key step: preventing crises. Any militarized crisis between nuclear-armed states is dangerous – “fog of crisis” raises risks
 - Avoiding crises is partly deterrence – but mainly foreign policy
 - A more modest foreign policy for a dangerous nuclear era?
- ☐ Preventing escalation from crisis to conflict
 - Partly deterrence – partly de-escalation, reassurance
- ☐ Preventing escalation to nuclear use
 - Similar issues – but heavier emphasis on deterrence
- ☐ How to reassure, reach resolutions, in the midst of crisis or conflict?

12