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미중 핵경쟁 연구 ⑥

The Multilateralism Way

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US-China Relation as the Cornerstone of the Future Global Nuclear Order

The dynamic geopolitical climate of the 21st century has seen a gradual but significant shift in the balance of power from the transatlantic region to the Asia-Pacific, resulting in the emergence of US-China relations as the focal point of the contemporary international order. Traditionally, the US-Russia relationship has been perceived as the linchpin of the global nuclear order, primarily due to the Cold War era's strategic balance of power and the staggering number of nuclear weapons that Moscow and Washington have accumulated.

However, as the 21st century unfolds, the evolving dynamics indicate that China will likely supersede Russia as a significant counterpart to the US across many domains, including nuclear. While Russia continued to be perceived by American policymakers as a security threat because of its erratic and unpredictable foreign policy, it is, however, China that will increasingly become "the overall pacing challenge for US defense planning and a growing factor in evaluation our nuclear deterrent" (National Security Strategy 2023). This is so because, as the most recent US Nuclear Posture Review asserts: "The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power" (National Security Strategy 2023).

However, the significance of US-China relations extends far beyond nuclear capabilities. The relationship is embedded in more significant and contentious issues such as global governance, regional primacy in the Indo-Pacific, and the race for technological dominance. With the rise of China as a global superpower, competition between the US and

China is redefining the contours of international norms and institutions, regional alliances, and the global technology landscape.

The intense contest for technological supremacy between these two nations, particularly in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and 5G technology, is shaping the future of international relations. It signifies a new phase of geo-technological competition, where national security and economic prosperity are inextricably linked with technological prowess. Consequently, as we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, understanding the US-China relationship and its myriad dimensions becomes crucial.

Confrontation, Competition, and Cooperation across the Decades: The Ambiguous Nuclear Relation between the United States and China

The US-China nuclear relationship has evolved significantly since 1945, moving from complete divergence to a complicated mix of cooperation, competition, and confrontation.

In the post-World War II era, the US emerged as the singular nuclear superpower in a transformed global setting. Meanwhile, China, impoverished and already devastated, was gripped by a civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party (KMT) and Mao Zedong's Communists. The US, having earlier supported the Nationalists during the war, backed them against the Communists, motivated by strategic alliances and Cold War anxieties. Yet, despite American support, Mao's Communists prevailed, owing to Nationalist corruption and unfulfilled reforms. 1949 Mao inaugurated the People's Republic of China, souring US-China ties. The US upheld its recognition of Taiwan, further intensifying tensions, especially when China began to showcase its nuclear prowess later in the century.

The decision by Chairman Mao Zedong to develop and test nuclear weapons was driven by a combination of national security concerns, geopolitical ambitions, and ideological convictions. In the early 1960s, China found itself in an increasingly hostile international environment. The United States had a significant nuclear arsenal and was militarily involved in the region, particularly in the Korean War and later in Vietnam. The relationship between China

and the Soviet Union deteriorated, culminating in the Sino-Soviet split. This left China feeling isolated and threatened, and possessing nuclear weapons was seen as a crucial means to ensure its security and sovereignty. The decision to pursue a nuclear weapon program was primarily motivated by China's perceived need for a strong deterrent in the face of a hostile international environment. Moreover, ideologically, Mao rejected the concept of alliance and collective security but invested in "self-reliance," arguing that China should not depend on other nations for its security. Developing a nuclear capability was a powerful demonstration of this principle, signaling China's ability to defend itself without relying on the protection of other powers.

China's advancement in nuclear capabilities heightened the urgency of U.S. initiatives to mitigate nuclear proliferation. Discussions surrounding the Partial Test Ban Treaty—which restricts nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, outer space, and underwater—gained momentum. Similarly, the inception of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), designed to curtail the dissemination of nuclear weapons and their underlying technologies, was significantly influenced by concerns over Mao's unchecked nuclear ambitions. By advocating for these treaties, the U.S. hoped to build a framework that would constrain China and provide a roadmap for the global community to manage and control nuclear capabilities.

Yet, these efforts proved in vain. In 1964, China successfully tested its first nuclear bomb at the Lop Nur test site, marking its entry into the nuclear club. The acquisition of nuclear weapons significantly changed China's foreign policy. Most specifically, rather than engaging with the international community, China retrenched inward and refused to engage with the emerging global nuclear order. As Davis argues: "Throughout the tensest periods of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union cooperated to build the nonproliferation regime, while China remained isolated from nonproliferation and arms control diplomacy. Washington, Moscow, and most other countries perceived mutual interests in controlling the spread of nuclear weapons. Still, China rejected the nonproliferation norm and refused to cooperate with the institutions and practices that constitute the regime" (Davis 1995).

Furthermore, like many other countries within the Non-Aligned Movement, China condemned the NPT as an unjust and unfair system designed to ensure the permanent nuclear monopoly of the nuclear weapons states with complete disregard for the rest of the international

community. The decision of China to operate outside of the NPT was primarily ideological but equally strategic, for it also afforded China the ability to operate without constraints, especially in exporting nuclear technology.

In the 1970s, the United States, under the leadership of President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, sought a détente strategy with the People's Republic of China to balance against the Soviet Union. This strategy marked a major shift in U.S. foreign policy and laid the groundwork for a significant rapprochement between the two countries, which eventually flourished in the 90s.

With the arrival of Deng Xiao Ping at the pinnacle of China's power and the need to develop through economic openness and global engagement, China gradually began to change its geopolitical isolation and embrace a more promising and constructive role in the global nuclear order. In 1990, China sent delegates to the Fourth Review Conference on the NPT (and other international arms control meetings) and issued favorable statements about the treaty. Over time, under increasing international pressure and perhaps recognizing the stabilizing role of non-proliferation norms, China moved toward accepting global nuclear non-proliferation regimes. It signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear weapons (NPT) in 1992, demonstrating its commitment to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The decision to sign the NPT was later followed by China's agreement to abide by the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) guidelines. These two decisions indeed reversed the historical isolationism that China had chosen at the beginning of the nuclear age. Still, they were also accompanied by other more ambiguous and ambivalent policies. For instance, while joining the NTP and the MTCT, China continued its nuclear and missile exports and refused to adhere to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) guidelines or to require full-scope safeguards on its nuclear exports suggesting that China was not yet ready to support the nonproliferation regime fully (Malik 2000).[1]

The commitment of China to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1996 added a layer of complexity and ambiguity to China's relationship with the global nuclear order. For months, negotiations over the CTBT stalled because of the position of India and China. While

[1] Furthermore, the revelations in April 1991 about China's secret reactor project in Algeria further reinforced the image of China only opportunistically and selectively engaging with the existing global nuclear norms.

India proposed to include a provision in the treaty that the nuclear weapon States agree to a time-bound framework for nuclear disarmament, China asked to allow peaceful nuclear explosions (PNEs) for such things as civil engineering projects. And while India walked away from the Treaty, China agreed to drop its demand for PNEs, allowing the negotiations to continue to their successful conclusion.

The Bush administration's pursuit of U.S. nuclear supremacy reignited deep-seated tensions with Beijing, provoking frustration, resentment, and antagonism. For example, The United States diplomatic efforts to achieve a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty within the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva were partially derailed by China's counterproposal to focus instead on achieving a Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat, or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects (PPWT) (Boese 2003).[2]

The US-India nuclear deal achieved in 2006 promoted a fierce response from China. In the People's Daily, a senior Chinese diplomat wrote on 27th October 2005 that the United States' actions for making a nuclear deal with India violated nuclear nonproliferation norms and argued that "The United States always called itself a guard for nuclear nonproliferation and condemned other countries for proliferation activities. But now it did not hesitate to revise the laws for taking exceptions for India.". The counter-response was swift. In 2010 China-Pakistan signed an agreement to expand on already existing nuclear cooperation by building two more 300-megawatt reactors. This agreement was accompanied by fierce opposition within the Nuclear Supplier Group to India's membership.

In fairness, attempts to soft balance against the United States were also followed by cooperation efforts. It is widely known, for instance, that China had a critical and constructive role in the negotiation processes leading to the JCPOA and went along with the UN resolutions that imposed sanctions on Iran, for instance, in the cases of Resolutions 1737 (in 2006), 1747 (in 2007), 1803 (in 2008), and 1929 (in 2010), which introduced a diverse array of sweeping sanctions against Iran.

[2] On February 10, 2003, Chinese Ambassador Hu Xiaodi at the CD stated that the conference should negotiate a legal instrument to prevent the weaponization of outer space by prohibiting the "testing, deployment and use of any weapon system and their components in outer space" and limiting the "use of satellites for military purposes." U.S. Ambassador Robert Grey responded on February 17 that a fissile material cutoff treaty remained Washington's priority and that the time was "not ripe" for outer space or nuclear disarmament negotiations—another priority of China and the Group of 21 non-aligned movements (Boese 2003)

In addition, China's leadership in the six-party talk was, for a while, both instrumental and successful in helping the US re-engage with North Korea. This opening to China had significant implications for nuclear non-proliferation.

With the arrival of the Trump administration, the relationship between the United States and China has continued to worsen, leaving the two countries locked in a dangerous spiral of mistrust, provocation, and diplomatic stalemate. The Biden administration thus far has been unable to alter this complex status quo and bring the relationship back on a stable footing.

Nuclear Discord: Areas of Confrontation and Disagreements between the United States and China Today

As of 2023, the US-China nuclear relationship remains complex, and it is essential to note from the onset that the U.S.-China nuclear relationship is intricately woven into a broader contest for technological, political, and economic supremacy. Consequently, the rivalry in the nuclear domain may be more symptomatic of the overarching U.S.-China dynamic rather than its genesis.

Certainly, China's rapid economic growth, technological advancements, and military modernization present significant challenges for the US. As China expands its global influence, concerns over its intentions and potential threats to the international order grow. The technological rivalry has spurred issues like the 'tech war', cyber-security concerns, and debates over 5G network infrastructure. The technological advancements of the PRC have also emboldened its foreign policy and national security ambitions over Taiwan and the South China Sea. In the Taiwan Strait, China has increased the frequency of its military exercises around Taiwan. It has also developed and demonstrated advanced missile systems capable of striking Taiwan, anti-access/area-denial capabilities to keep U.S. or other foreign military forces at bay, and other high-tech military systems.

Similarly, in the South China Sea, China's territorial claims and construction of artificial islands have raised tensions with the US and its allies, who uphold the freedom of navigation principle under international law.

In addition, the growing closeness between China and Russia and their "friendship without limit" has become an additional area of concern for the West and the United States. Their alignment, particularly in opposing US-led initiatives in international forums and potential military cooperation, can pose significant geopolitical challenges to what the US considers to be the legitimate rule-based order. China's reluctance to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for instance, and the US accusations of China's readiness to assist Russia militarily have further strained and worsened their diplomatic relations. This unwillingness is often seen as China's tacit support for changes in the international order via force, undermining the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In the nuclear domain, the issues that have come to define the US-China confrontation are few and increasingly intractable.

China's decision to expand its nuclear arsenal, thereby breaking its nuclear restraint tradition that raised eyebrows among American policymakers. China's accelerated development of its nuclear capabilities has raised concerns among American policymakers, as outlined in the Pentagon's annual report on China's military power published in November 2021. This report named China as "the most comprehensive and serious challenge" for the U.S., according to the Biden administration's National Defense Strategy.

The Pentagon has recently predicted that if the current rate of China's nuclear expansion continues, the country could amass a stockpile of around 1,500 warheads by 2035. This is an upward adjustment from the Pentagon's previous estimates, which projected Beijing could accumulate 700 warheads by 2027 and 1,000 by 2030. Furthermore, the report highlights that China is constructing three silo fields for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), potentially adding at least 300 new silos for two Dongfeng (DF) missile variants. These fields were first discovered by open-source intelligence analysts in 2021.

The United States has responded to China's nuclear development by adopting a 2-prong approach: 1) Accelerating its nuclear modernization and (plausibly) rethinking the size of its nuclear forces and posture, 2) Strengthening alliances capabilities. With diplomatic efforts dwindling, the two countries are in effect today, locked in an uncontrolled arms race that spans different domains, including nuclear.

A recent report by Livermore National Laboratory provides insights into the current US nuclear debate vis a vis China and makes a case for the US to additional capabilities to its current nuclear forces. For the first time in its nuclear history – the writers argue - the United States faces two major power adversaries armed with large and diverse nuclear forces, capable of challenging the United States and its allies in a limited regional war fought with conventional forces and bound together by hostility to U.S.- led global and regional orders and the resolve to bring about their end. "Both (Russia and China) are armed with many new weapons, nuclear and otherwise, as well as new ideas about how to utilize them to break U.S. alliances and the U.S. will to defend it" (Livermore National Laboratory 2023, 4).

The current US nuclear modernization – the report argues – has been structured to counter Russia as the principal nuclear adversary and deter China's minimal deterrence nuclear arsenal. As China's nuclear arsenal grows, the United States might be forced to expand its nuclear arsenals and manufacture more. And while the U.S. doesn't need to replicate the exact nuclear capabilities of China and Russia, some Washington policymakers believe that the current stance, crafted with only one primary nuclear opponent in mind, is inadequate for confronting dual major nuclear threats.

Washington has also been deepening its military relationships with regional allies and partners. This includes traditional allies like Japan, Australia, and South Korea, as well as fostering new or enhanced partnerships with countries like India and Vietnam. The first very tangible result of the Indo-Pacific strategy was the formation in September 2021 of an enhanced trilateral security partnership among the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia called "AUKUS." According to the official AUKUS website, the agreement is "intended to strengthen the ability of each government to support security and defense interests, building on longstanding and ongoing bilateral ties. It will promote deeper information and technology sharing; and foster deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains."

The formation of AUKUS was followed in March 2023 by the announcement that three countries will collaborate in providing Australia with the nuclear-powered submarine capability to enhance Australia's deterrence at sea strategy in the Indo-Pacific. China has vehemently opposed this pact, seeing it as a threat to its interests and regional stability.

What Prospects for Nuclear Cooperation?

One of the most consequential questions today is about the prospects for diplomatic dialogue and cooperation between the United States and China amid growing regional and global tensions. Under what conditions could détente be re-established between the two countries? What is the most appropriate level of diplomatic engagement between the two countries? And how can it be achieved?

US policymakers seem adamant about engaging China at the bilateral level. Requests for meeting bilaterally without pre-conditions have come from senior officials of the Biden administration ranging from the National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan,[3] to the Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin (Sullivan 2023; Garamone 2023).[4] But all to no avail. China has thus far rejected all invites to engage in a strategic stability dialogue with the United States. And in recent months, US national security council Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell admitted, "China has been reluctant to engage in discussions around confidence building or crisis communication. Given that our forces operate in proximity, we're going to have increasing challenges."

[3] In a speech delivered at the annual meeting of the Arms Control Association in Washington DC, on June 2, 2023, Jake Sullivan stated: "But unlike Russia—who is threatening to walk away from the negotiating table, from the arms control agreements our countries have relied upon for years—the PRC has thus far opted not to come to the table for substantive dialogue on arms control. It has declined to share the size and scope of its nuclear forces or to provide launch notifications. And it has not shown much interest in discussions regarding the changes it is making to its nuclear forces. Simply put, we have yet to see a willingness from the PRC to compartmentalize strategic stability from broader issues in the relationship. And that compartmentalization, as I noted before, has been the bedrock of nuclear security—indeed strategic stability—for decades." (Sullivan 2023)

[4] During the Shangri-La meeting in June 2023, Secretary Austin asked to meet with his Chinese counterpart but was declined. The US Secretary of Defense will later publicly state: "I would welcome any opportunity to engage with leadership. I think defense departments should be talking to each other on a routine basis or should have open channels for communication" (Garamone 2023)

Prospects of direct bilateral engagement between China and the United States will remain grim for various reasons.

1. Strategic calculations: China might perceive that engaging with the U.S. on some issues might legitimize U.S. concerns, especially when China believes these concerns to be unfounded or a part of a broader strategic containment strategy.
2. Domestic concerns: Beijing often frames its relationship with Washington in the context of the 'century of humiliation' at the hands of Western powers. Engaging with the U.S. on sensitive matters could be seen domestically as capitulating to external pressures, potentially undermining the Communist Party's image of strength.
3. US unpredictability and untrustworthiness: Shifts in U.S. policy, especially between successive administrations, can make Beijing wary of the utility and longevity of bilateral agreements. The U.S.'s withdrawal from international agreements, such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran Nuclear Deal during the Trump administration, might have cemented this perception.
4. Distrust: Historical and recent events have fostered a sense of distrust between the two nations. Espionage accusations, trade disputes, and disagreements on global governance issues contribute to this atmosphere of suspicion.

If bilateral cooperation seems improbable, cooperation between the United States and China at the regional level, within East Asia or the Indo-Pacific, seems even more implausible. To begin, historically, East Asia, despite its economic dynamism and significant global influence, notably needs a robust regional governance architecture. This absence stands in stark contrast to other parts of the world, where regional institutions and frameworks play crucial roles in fostering cooperation, ensuring stability, and managing conflict. Europe, for example, has established a dense network of institutions such as the European Union, NATO, and the OSCE, which collectively address a broad spectrum of economic, security, and political issues. Similarly, Southeast Asia boasts ASEAN, an organization that has grown in its ambit and influence, providing a platform for member states to address shared challenges and articulate a

collective regional identity. In comparison, East Asia's patchwork of bilateral treaties, occasional multilateral engagements, and ad-hoc summitry reveal a distinct lack of institutional depth. This isn't to say that there have been no attempts to institutionalize regional cooperation. Forums like the East Asia Summit, ASEAN+3, and APEC have all sought to bring regional actors together. Yet, these mechanisms, while useful, have not evolved into comprehensive governance structures with binding commitments and a clear, unified vision.

The improbability of a regional cooperation framework is borne out of specific intrinsic attributes unique to East Asia. The nations of East Asia have a long history of conflicts, invasions, and territorial disputes. For instance, the historical animosity between China, Japan, and South Korea rooted in World War II and earlier remains a significant barrier to cooperation. Territorial disputes, particularly in the South China Sea involving China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines, further undermine prospects for cooperation and positive engagement. The unpredictable nature of North Korea's nuclear ambitions and its missile tests has been a persistent concern for its neighbors, particularly South Korea and Japan. The North Korean nuclear program has also deepened ROK and Japan's resentment over China's perceived appeasement and passivity over Pyongyang.

While bilateral and regional engagements prove challenging, China and US engagement at the multilateral level could instead bear some results. China's preference for engaging at the multilateral level stems from a range of strategic, political, and economic considerations. Firstly, multilateral engagement allows China to project itself as a responsible global actor, signaling its commitment to international norms and multilateralism. This approach aids in counterbalancing any narratives that might perceive China as a disruptive power on the world stage.

Another dimension to consider is China's advocacy for a multipolar world order. In such an arrangement, power is distributed more evenly among major nations, minimizing the unilateral influence of any one country, particularly the United States. Multilateral forums naturally embody this multipolarity and grant China the opportunity to shape global norms and standards in line with its interests.

Moreover, within multilateral settings, China often finds itself in a favorable position to rally support from other countries. This is especially true with developing nations, which can back China's stances, giving it a stronger diplomatic voice against more dominant powers. China's vast economic

outreach, epitomized by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also benefits from multilateral engagements. Such platforms help safeguard Chinese interests, streamline initiatives, and tackle concerns in a collective framework.

Risk management is another advantage of the multilateral approach. In situations like conflict resolution or peacekeeping, multilateral engagement distributes the operational and financial burdens among the participants. Furthermore, many of the challenges China seeks to address, including climate change, terrorism, and public health crises, are inherently transnational. Tackling these effectively mandates multilateral cooperation.

Multilateralism also serves as a balancing tool. If China experiences strains in its bilateral relations with another country, such as the U.S., multilateral interactions offer a venue to diversify its diplomatic and economic channels.

As China continues to surge in fields like technology, it naturally seeks a major role in setting global standards. Multilateral forums offer it the leverage to influence international regulations, norms, and standards in various sectors, including technology and trade. Lastly, on certain sensitive matters, expressing its stance within a multilateral context can shield China from direct confrontations, thus avoiding potential bilateral entanglements.

Areas for Multilateral Nuclear Engagement between the United States and China

There are multiple multilateral channels that China and the US could use to boost their relations.

For a start, the P5 nuclear work has gained centrality and prominence in recent years. Established in 2009 and revived in 2019, the P5 nuclear working group is the only existing and active framework for nuclear diplomacy among the nuclear weapons states (recognized within the NPT). Despite obvious and frequently intractable geopolitical disagreements, the group has made strides in fostering transparency, standardizing a reporting template on nuclear stockpiles, postures, and doctrines, and achieving consensus on nuclear terminology (Shetty and Williams 2020, 5). A critical area of work for the P5 is nuclear risk reduction which has further developed in recent years to incorporate discussions on the role of emerging technology. For instance, an

emerging proposal to commit the P5 to retain human command and control of nuclear weapons reflects a growing common concern about the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) on strategic stability and nuclear deterrence.

Yet beyond the P5, US-China can utilize other mechanisms to forge a common nuclear agenda and reduce mistrust and antagonism. For example, the United States and China could deepen their cooperation within the International Atomic Energy Agency by collaborating to:

1) Reinforcing the existing legal framework to prevent attacks against civilian nuclear infrastructures. China and the US have expressed deep concerns over the situation in Zaporizhia and have contributed financially to bolster the IAEA's capacity to intervene.

2) Reinforcing global response to prevent and mitigate the environmental consequences of nuclear activities, including accidents, incidents, and tests. China is highly concerned about the possible environmental damage from further DPRK tests and has also complained about the decision of the Japanese government to release a significant amount of contaminated water from the Fukushima reactors into the Ocean. The environmental risks of various nuclear activities, including the transportation of fissile material and spent fuel, could be an essential area of common interest that could foster scientific cooperation.

In addition, both countries are signatory to the CTBT. Work on the nuclear testing moratorium can be done alongside support to the CTBT and its entry into force. For instance, on China's nuclear test program, the most recent report issued by the Biden Administration to monitor adherence and compliance with arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament agreements and commitments, states: "Concerns remain about activities at the Lop Nur Nuclear Test Site given the PRC's lack of transparency on its nuclear testing activities at the site, its previous use of explosive containment chambers, and prior questions regarding its adherence to the "zero-yield" standard in its nuclear weapons testing moratorium. As appropriate, the United States will engage with the PRC to address nuclear test site activities of concern relative to the PRC's moratorium" (U.S. State Department 2023). American concerns over China and Russia's noncompliance with the "zero-yield" nuclear moratorium are not new. Yet, it might become a central domain for contestation and opposition. As the nuclear arms race accelerates and new weapons are designed and tested, pressure to resume nuclear testing

explosion might equally rise. As the CTBT remains condemned into a diplomatic limbo and no realistic prospects exist for its entering into force, nuclear testing has the potential to become a critical area for mistrust and suspicion between the two countries. Hence, both countries, signatories to the CTBT, could work to strengthen the unilateral moratorium on nuclear test explosions by exchanging data, agreeing on standard procedures to enhance transparency at nuclear test sites, and – in due course – encouraging scientific exchanges among nuclear laboratories in charge of nuclear tests.

Furthermore, work can be initiated within the UN Secretariat and the UN Office on Disarmament Affairs (UNODA). Within the UN, both countries could submit a proposal to rethink negative security assurances to nonnuclear weapons states.

The illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine has undermined the credibility of the NSA and left a critical political vacuum in the relations between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states. How can countries that abide by their nuclear nonproliferation obligations be protected against predatory nuclear weapons states? The United States and China are competing to increase their spheres of influence among emerging countries, many of which reside in regions with regional nuclear weapons free zone treaties. The competition for the hearts and minds of the Global South can be transformed into an essential opportunity for cooperation between the two countries. Both countries could commit to ratifying the additional protocols of all nuclear weapons-free zone treaties and work to establish regional dialogues with nonnuclear weapons states.

The Limits of Cooperation: Some Conclusions

Achieving cooperation between the US and China is a tall-order goal, but it is necessary and urgent. To bolster the chances that such cooperation materializes, some conditions must be met.

First, technical cooperation should be prioritized over political goals (at least at the beginning): Technical goals seem more achievable and traceable than political ones that are often vague, and might lead to misinterpretation.

Second, each country must be willing to constrain and restrain its most hawkish domestic forces that reign against cooperation. Anti-China sentiments are today prevalent in

Washington, and similarly, the US is often despised and criticized within Chinese political circles. The domestic political context must be managed for restraint and cooperation to prevail. This requires political leadership in both countries.

Third, expectations should be low and manageable. The all-or-nothing approach will take us nowhere. Promoting rapprochement between China and the United States via multilateral institutions will require a gradual and long-standing process.

Finally, the two countries will have to commit to remaining committed even as bilateral crises might emerge—multilateralism to pay off demands continuous engagement. To be effective here and wherever possible, both countries need to insulate their multilateral efforts from domestic forces that might try to undermine them.

As the U.S.-China rivalry deepens, the imperative for collaboration grows ever more crucial. The global landscape is such that even a minor miscommunication or error in judgment between the two powers could spell disaster on an international scale. Over the past seven decades, Washington and Beijing have navigated cycles of strain and rapprochement, always underpinned by mutual recognition of the grim realities of nuclear conflict: it's neither winnable nor survivable. This wisdom, which has guided past interactions, should prevail again and steer them toward renewed diplomatic dialogue and political engagement. ■

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