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EXISTENTIAL NEED FOR REDUCING US-CHINA NUCLEAR TENSIONS

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The United States and China are locked in a nuclear standoff, arming themselves without dialogue. In Washington, concerns over China's rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal include serious consideration that Chinese and Russian nuclear forces could combine during a crisis to numerically overmatch those of the U.S. This two near-peer framework drives calls to expand the number of deployed U.S. nuclear weapons and to invest in new capabilities.

Emergent and suggested new U.S. capabilities, in turn, validate a long-held assumption in Beijing that Washington will never accept that China has achieved a second-strike capability against the U.S. Acknowledgment that the U.S.-China nuclear deterrence relationship is one of mutually assured destruction could, in theory, eliminate a major driver of not just the Chinese but also a U.S. nuclear buildup. Instead, Chinese experts contend that the U.S. aims to avoid or escape a mutually assured destruction relationship with China by continually seeking new technological advantages over Chinese forces.

Missile defense misconceptions

Golden Dome, a proposed multilayer defense system for the United States, is the latest and a particularly stark example of this approach in Chinese perceptions. Its ostensible function — to intercept all foreign missile attacks — would, according to their interpretation, lower the barriers to Washington launching a nuclear attack on China, as the Golden Dome would then shield the U.S. from Chinese nuclear retaliation. To ensure a credible second-strike capability through this shield, Chinese analysts contend that China must continue to scale up its nuclear forces.

The differing relevance of Golden Dome to U.S. and Chinese nuclear planning highlights how a lack of consistent strategic dialogue can allow misunderstandings to become embedded in force posturing — and potentially even in crisis decision-making. In the

U.S., outside of the Trump administration itself and a small minority of the nuclear expert community, Golden Dome has been met with near-universal and well-founded derision. The poor performance of existing U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) defense systems, after decades of generous funding, means an impenetrable shield requires a technological leap on a scale that is not credible.

Chinese analysts should especially note that U.S. nuclear planning is proceeding on the apparent basis that Golden Dome does not and will not exist as described. A Trump administration confident in Golden Dome would cancel development of other new and modernized capabilities, and exhibit less concern about the adverse two near-peer nuclear balance. At best, Golden Dome will represent a slight upgrade to existing U.S. ICBM defenses, which China can already easily surmount. It should be uncontroversial for U.S. officials to explain this point in U.S.-China dialogue, as it is evident from the history of U.S. ICBM defenses and current administration practices.

However, without sustained, high-level strategic dialogue, U.S.-China nuclear planning is more likely to be based on worst-case assumptions about rival intentions rather than on accurate understandings of threat drivers and how to address them. Moreover, the absence of unconditional nuclear strategic dialogue is not just confined to the U.S.-China rivalry, and afflicts other nuclear-armed states.

Fail-safe reviews and risk reduction in the absence of nuclear dialogue

While the need for these dialogues intensifies, China and other nuclear-armed states can also take an important risk reduction measure that does not require dialogue, negotiations, protocols or treaties. This is a unilateral fail-safe review, in which states independently assess the resilience of all elements of their nuclear forces and command and control systems against malfunctions, malign actors or errors that could lead to accidental nuclear use. Such reviews would remain fully classified in their operations and findings, with no expectation of public disclosure of their results.

The growing threats to the integrity of all nuclear forces posed by new cyber, space, and information warfare vectors make this recommendation especially timely, as was noted in the U.S. justification for its recent review. This review concluded last year. By identifying and eliminating existing and potential risks that could lead to accidental nuclear use — through the fresh perspective provided by an independent review, potentially composed of trusted retired senior national security and nuclear scientific officials — China and other nuclear-armed states could enhance their national security while meaningfully advancing nuclear risk reduction efforts.

Toward this end, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, Nuclear Threat Initiative, and European Leadership Network have been leading senior Track-1.5 and Track-2 fail-safe workshops in China, India, Pakistan, the U.K. and France over the last year, with extensive resources on our websites. Our latest workshop between Chinese and U.S.

experts took place in Beijing last week and displayed the value of continued engagement between the two superpowers on this existential issue.

The completion and implementation of fail-safe reviews could lead to a greater willingness to engage on reducing shared nuclear risks. However, as we have heard in many of our workshops throughout the Asia-Pacific, the clear national security and risk reduction benefits of such reviews still cannot substitute for direct strategic dialogues to curtail the most dangerous drivers of catastrophic nuclear miscalculation. These initiatives are necessary if we are to safely navigate this era of complex nuclear multipolarity and emerging technologies.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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