Managing China–U.S. “strategic competition”: potential risks and possible approaches

Jishe Fan¹

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Abstract

The relationship between China and the United States has entered a new phase in which the original framework of the bilateral relationship is falling apart, a new framework has yet to be established, and both sides are exploring ways to move forward. “Strategic competition”, at least for the short and medium term, will be the new normal for this relationship, and the Biden administration strengthened this approach even further. The shifting framework of the bilateral relationship is bound to reshape each side’s perceptions of the other, and any action based on misperception and miscalculation is subject to accident or even conflict. Thus, it is critical for both sides to properly manage the “strategic competition” between them. Both China and the United States should take in the experience and lessons of the Cold War. The two sides should work together to identify issue areas where differences exist and create conditions to manage and resolve those differences; try to incorporate new arrangements for crisis management into existing diplomatic and security dialogue mechanisms on different levels; fully implement agreements immediately relevant to crisis management while exploring ways to reach new ones; and keep dialogue and communication channels open at all levels so that clear signals can be sent out through official or unofficial means.

Keywords China–U.S. relations · U.S. policy toward China · Strategic competition · Crisis management · Biden administration

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✉ Jishe Fan
fanjishe@yahoo.com

¹ Institute for International Strategic Studies, Party School of the Central Committee of C.P.C. (National Academy of Governance), No. 100 Dayouzhuan, Haidian District, Beijing 100091, China

1 Introduction¹

Under the Trump administration, the United States substantially adjusted its China policy framework from engagement and cooperation to strategic competition. The relationship between China and the United States has entered a new phase in which the original framework of the bilateral relationship is falling apart, a new framework has yet to be established, and both sides are exploring ways to move forward.

President Joe Biden, in his remarks on U.S. foreign policy, declared that his administration will “take on directly the challenges posed to our prosperity, security, and democratic values by our most serious competitor, China” (Biden 2021). In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance released by the White House in early March, China is designated as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system” (The White House 2021a). U.S. policy toward China has been redefined with “three Cs”, namely, “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and confrontational (adversarial) when it must be”.² These policy statements and postures indicate that Biden administration is about to take approaches very similar to the Trump administration in handling differences and disputes with China.

China’s response has been direct and clear. In President Xi Jinping’s Special Address at the World Economic Forum Virtual Event of the Davos Agenda on January 25th, 2021, he proposed that the two sides “advocate fair competition, like competing with each other for excellence in a racing field, not beating each other on a wrestling arena” (Xi 2021). Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, at a press conference on the margins of the Fourth Session of the 13th National People’s Congress (NPC), also emphasized that China and the U.S. should carry out “healthy competition on a fair and just basis” and manage differences and disagreements effectively through candid communication to prevent strategic miscalculation and avoid conflict and confrontation (Wang 2021).

It seems that “strategic competition” will be the new normal in Sino-U.S. relations over the coming years. Thus, it will be a daunting challenge for both sides to manage the “strategic competition” between them, reduce risks, and prevent miscalculation in the medium term and the long run. This article reviews American policy changes toward China, assesses the potential risks embedded in “strategic

¹ “Strategic competition” is a term frequently used by American officials and experts to define the current state, the nature, and the trend of bilateral relationship. When Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi met with U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Zurich, Switzerland on October 6, 2021, he said that the nature of China–U.S. relations is mutually beneficial, and China opposes defining China–U.S. relations as “competitive” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2021). This essay uses this term to discuss American policy toward China and its implication in military and security area.

² Policy statements on China by American officials and in relevant government documents vary in minor ways. “Cooperative” and “cooperation” are used in some places and “collaborative” in others. President Joe Biden (2021) is quoted as using “confront” in his February 4th remarks, and State Secretary Blinken (2021) used “adversarial” in his remarks on March 3rd, 2021.

competition”, and explores possible approaches to managing the China–U.S. “strategic competition”.

2 “Strategic competition”: the new normal for Sino-U.S. relations

Since Trump took office, economic and trade issues have become the focal point in American policy toward China. The United States’ increasingly confrontational approach not only failed to solve the trade and economic disputes between the two countries but also spread to other issue areas. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, contrary to the expectations of many observers, China and the United States failed to cooperate as they had in the past, and the pandemic became the catalyst for the further deterioration of the bilateral relationship. Now that the U.S. views all the troublesome issues in Sino-U.S. relations through the lens of national security and has taken a more confrontational approach toward China in all aspects, the differences and disputes between the two countries are becoming comprehensive, more of a national security or ideological nature, and unsolvable. As a result, the interactions between the two countries over many sensitive issues are more prone to the risk of accidents, crises, and conflicts.

First, the previous framework of American policy toward China, which lasted for more than four decades, was overturned by the Trump administration, leading to the current new reality for both sides. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and the United States, the bilateral relationship has undergone and survived various differences, disputes, accidents, and crises. The overall stability of the relationship was maintained because the framework of American policy toward China was engagement and cooperation. According to the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China. Because China did not develop in that way, the Trump administration declared the end of engagement and the beginning of “strategic competition” (The White House 2017, 25).

This policy shift was emphatically expressed when Mike Pompeo, a Republican secretary of state, stood in front of the Nixon Presidential Library, the library of a Republican president, on July 23, 2020, and declared that the U.S. policy of engagement with China over the last 50 years was a failure and that it must be terminated. He asserted that engagement did not bring about the kind of change inside China that President Nixon had hoped to induce and that the old paradigm of blind engagement with China must not continue (Pompeo 2020a). Since then, China–U.S. interactions have stepped into an uncertain future.

Second, the gaps between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, the executive branch and Congress, and the public and elites with regard to China policy are narrowing; a new consensus on China is emerging. The policy shift has gained bipartisan support as well as input from both the executive branch and Congress.

Change in the interactions between the executive branch and Congress is very telling. Since the end of the Cold War, the executive branch and Congress have checked and balanced one another in their handling of China policy, with the

executive branch serving as the driving force and Congress as the obstructing one. However, this dynamic of checks and balances has been disappearing over the last few years. As the executive branch has rolled out more confrontational policies toward China, congress members have also ramped up their legislative activity on China. For instance, the 116th Congress introduced a total of 366 bills and non-binding resolutions related to China from January 2019 to August 2020, covering a wide range of issues ranging from trade, investment, and supply chains to national security, information technology, and human rights (Kennedy 2020). Although many of the introduced bills did not become public laws, the increase in the tempo of legislative measures and the narrowing gap between the two parties on China-related issues is alarming.

The average American's attitude toward China has become more negative. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, as trade frictions have intensified, the American public has taken a more negative view of China. These negative perceptions of China have further deteriorated since the breakout of the pandemic (Silver et al. 2019; Devlin et al. 2020). It seems that a new consensus on China has taken shape in the United States.

Third, many actions against China taken by the U.S. have far-reaching implications. In recent years, Congress has frequently introduced legislation involving sensitive and sovereignty-related issues, such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. These legislative activities have solidified and perpetuated its negative posture and tough approach on China, limiting room for the executive branch to maneuver when necessary. Since Biden took office, both chambers of the 117th Congress have introduced even more confrontational China-related legislations.

Traditionally, the secretary of state and other officials in the State Department are discreet in their words and deeds, and they usually try very hard to be diplomatic. However, starting from the Trump administration, the diplomatic community has been ready to challenge China in a very blunt fashion, becoming less and less diplomatic. Then Secretary of State Pompeo made lots of public accusations against the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China (CPC), and it seems Secretary Blinken is now following suit. This partly explains why Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Sullivan's first in-person meeting with their Chinese counterparts was unfolded in that way in Anchorage on March 18–19.

U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies have taken many harassing actions to frustrate the people-to-people and educational exchanges between China and the U.S. According to a report from the *New York Times*, the FBI deliberately harassed and threatened some Chinese experts and scholars who visited the U.S. for academic exchanges, and their visas were later revoked (Perlez 2019, 19). The Justice Department launched a so-called "China Initiative" to develop an enforcement strategy aimed at non-traditional intelligence collectors (The United States Department of Justice 2021). Law enforcement agencies targeted Chinese scholars, students, and institutions, and even tried to press U.S. colleges and universities to suspend their exchange programs with China. Chinese media institutions and journalists also experienced various kinds of restrictions. Chinese media outlets and Confucius Institutes in the United States encountered many obstacles as well.

The adjustment of American policy toward China is strategic, substantive, and systematic; it is bound to have a long-term impact. “Strategic competition”, at least in the short and medium term, will be the new normal for China and the United States.

3 Potential risks in China–U.S. “strategic competition”

American policy change will reshape both countries’ perceptions of each other and increase the risks of misperception and miscalculation. Actions and reactions based on such misperception are more likely to induce accidents or even conflicts. Therefore, it will be essential for both sides to properly manage the “strategic competition” between them.

When the United States emphasizes the “strategic competition” nature of the bilateral relationship, it tends to exaggerate and distort China’s policies, emphasizing the assertive aspect of China’s statements or actions. Rising anxiety about China may lead to overreaction. A good example of this is how the U.S. has interpreted China’s policy planning. China has drafted and implemented 5-year plans since 1953; it is routine and normal practice for the Chinese government to use them to set medium-term national development goals and policy priorities. When China was a weak player with limited comprehensive national power and its domestic policies had very limited international influence, the United States barely paid any attention to the national plans made by the Chinese government. With the rapid development of China, especially since China became the world’s second largest economy in 2010, the United States has started to “rethink” China’s national planning, and some of its officials and experts have begun to exaggerate the domestic and international impact of China’s 5-year plans. This dynamic is clearly reflected in the way Trump administration officials interpreted and reacted to China’s “Made in China 2025” industrial policies (U.S. Library of Congress 2020).

There are additional misinterpretations, misjudgments, and distortions in American views on China’s policies on ideology, government–enterprise relationships, and China’s participation in global governance. When CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping stated in his report to the 19th National Congress of the CPC that the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics blazes “a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization” that “offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence” (Xi 2017a, 1), American officials and scholars mistakenly interpreted the statement as an attempt by China to expand its ideology and models. In fact, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping had already made a very clear statement on ideological issues in his keynote speech at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting at the end of 2017, openly stressing that while China explores laws of social development for humanity and shares it with other countries, it “will neither import foreign models of development nor export the Chinese model, and will not ask other countries to copy the Chinese practice” (Xi 2017b, 2). Nonetheless, American officials and scholars would rather read ideological issues according to

their own preferences rather than according to the report and the remarks themselves. The relationship between the Chinese government and Chinese state-owned enterprises is similarly distorted, and China's economy has been labeled as "state capitalism". With the growth of its comprehensive national power, China has demonstrated stronger political will and greater potential capability to participate in global governance. However, China's practices are regarded as challenges to the existing international order. A good example of this is the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. When China initiated this bank, the United States not only was reluctant to join itself but also tried very hard—in vain—to dissuade its allies from getting on board (Tiezzi 2015).

Misinterpretation of China's policies may lead to overreaction from the American side, which is not conducive to the national interests of either party. The measures taken by the U.S. against China in the high-tech field are an example of this risk. Guided by misperception and distortion, China–U.S. "strategic competition" may drift into strategic confrontation. That is exactly what both sides must be wary of.

There are many potential risks in China–U.S. "strategic competition"; proper management will help reduce those risks. While the framework of China–U.S. relations is falling apart, the state of the bilateral relationship will be driven mostly by specific issues, at least in the foreseeable future. If the competition of this kind cannot be properly and effectively managed, a potential crisis awaits China and the United States. If a crisis occurs, it will be much more difficult for both sides to manage than in the past due to the bad state of the bilateral relationship, rising nationalistic sentiment, and poorly organized communication channels.

American moves in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait have the potential to further escalate intense competition and bring about crises. On July 13, 2020, then Secretary of State Michael Pompeo issued the U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea, reaffirming U.S. support of the arbitral tribunal of the South China Sea Arbitration's 2016 decision (Pompeo 2020b). This aroused suspicion that the U.S. had changed its traditional policy on territorial disputes and begun to take sides. The U.S. military has also significantly increased the frequency and intensity of its so-called "freedom of navigation operations" and conducted more aircraft carrier exercises in the South China Sea, "increasing and showing off its military presence in the South China Sea" (Wang 2020a). For instance, the U.S. Navy conducted dual aircraft carrier exercises involving the USS Roosevelt and Nimitz aircraft carrier combat groups simultaneously in the South China Sea in February 2021. Further, with the mobilization of the United States, the UK, France, and Germany have announced that they will also send their naval forces to exercise so-called "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region (Lv 2021).

China believes that the United States is changing its long-lasting policy toward Taiwan as well. More advanced weaponry has been sold to Taiwan, more meetings between high-ranking U.S. and Taiwan officials have been arranged, more American naval vessels have been dispatched to transit the Taiwan Strait, and more support of so-called "international space" for Taiwan has been offered. In taking these measures, the United States is challenging the basic consensus and understanding between itself and China on the Taiwan issue. Even though President Biden and his team have reaffirmed the traditional American policy on the Taiwan issue, it has

inherited and continued the Trump administration's policy adjustment (The White House 2021b).

The Biden administration is bolstering the Indo-Pacific Strategy as well. On March 12, Biden held a virtual Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the leaders of Japan, Australia, and India to coordinate positions on political, economic, and security issues in the Indo-Pacific region (Biden et al. 2021; The White House 2021c). In late September, President Biden hosted the first in-person Quad meeting and issued a joint statement. The United States and Japan issued a joint statement called the U.S.–Japan Global Partnership for a New Era covering a variety of issues immediately related to China after the meeting between President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide (The White House 2021d). Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin have conducted shuttle diplomacy in Southeast Asia as well. It seems the United States is organizing an Asian NATO to contain and compete with China.

American practices toward and pressure on China are prone to lead to conflicts or even cause crises. If there is no mechanism of dispute and crisis management in place, China–U.S. “strategic competition” could become a zero-sum game, heightening the risk of strategic confrontation.

4 Managing “strategic competition”: is it politically possible?

In the past, there existed differences and disputes in China–U.S. bilateral relations, and the often-intense relationship sometimes experienced crises as well. When the bilateral relationship was in good shape and both countries were willing to shelve differences, address disputes, and manage crises, the bilateral relationship could be stabilized. Nowadays, things are developing in a quite different direction, with differences and disputes amplified, securitized, and ideologized. Because policies of pressure, sanctions, and confrontation instead of consultation, negotiation, and diplomacy were applied to the bilateral relationship, it is no surprise that the China–U.S. trade war has developed into a war spanning politics, economy, and security. Consequently, the space for China–U.S. economic and security cooperation is shrinking and the room for the competition is broadening.

Though the framework of the bilateral relationship is falling apart, “strategic competition” is only an intermediate state that will not decide where China–U.S. relations should and will head. It is up to both China and the United States to define the future of the relationship; neither can do this alone. The current state of the bilateral relationship and the vicious, negative interactions between China and the United States are worrisome. If differences and disputes cannot be effectively controlled and properly managed, there is the risk that “strategic competition” will drift into confrontation, which is in neither China nor the U.S.’s interests. Since 2018, former U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson Jr. has warned against the risks facing the China–U.S. relationship at the annual Bloomberg New Economy Forum. He warned in 2018 that the U.S. and China were at a crossroads and that what had been a healthy “strategic competition” might “tip into a full-blown Cold War”. He went on to warn in 2019 against the risks and harm of

economic decoupling and asserted in 2020 that “competition without unnecessary confrontation should be our goal”. He suggested that the incoming Biden administration should carry out a policy of “targeted reciprocity” toward China (Paulson 2018, 2019, 2020). Dr. Henry Kissinger, at the same forum, also repeatedly warned against the risk of competition between China and the U.S. sliding into the Cold War or confrontation. Only through proper management of “strategic competition” will China and the U.S. be able to steer the bilateral relationship in the right direction and avoid the worst scenario.

It seems that the U.S. is willing to invest in managing the relationship. In the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, it states that “competition does not always mean hostility, nor does it inevitably lead to conflict”, and “enhanced missile defense is not intended to undermine strategic stability or disrupt longstanding strategic relationships with Russia or China” (The White House 2017, 2, 8). In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance released by Biden Administration, it also recognizes that “strategic competition” does not and should not preclude working with China on issues in which national fates are intertwined, such as climate change, global health security, arms control, and nonproliferation (The White House 2021a).

In late 2020 and early 2021, against the backdrop of the sharp deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations, top military officials unexpectedly played a stabilizing role in the bilateral relationship. In his remarks at an International Institute for Strategic Studies webinar on the U.S. vision for security in the Indo-Pacific region, Secretary Esper said, “We are not in search of conflict, we are committed to a constructive and results-oriented relationship with China and, within our defense relationship, to open lines of communication and risk reduction” (Esper 2020). On October 20, 2020, high-ranking military officials from both sides had a telephone conversation and agreed to strengthen communication between the two militaries, properly manage differences, and conduct cooperation in areas of common interests. The two militaries then convened the first Crisis Communications Working Group by video teleconference to discuss concepts of crisis communications, crisis prevention, and crisis management on October 28 and 29 (Mei 2020). In January 2021, there were also exchanges on relevant issues between General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the U.S., and General Li Zuocheng, Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission of China.

Both China and the United States have the political will to manage Sino-American “strategic competition”. This political will has been nurtured by the historical experience and lessons drawn from the development of bilateral relations. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, China and the U.S. have managed to navigate several major crises, including the political disturbance in 1989, the crisis over the Taiwan Strait in 1995–1996, the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the EP-3 incident in 2001. Because of the changing context of the bilateral relationship, there is not much room left for complacency in crisis management. The United States’ confrontational approach in dealing with China has been responded to in kind by China, which has made compromise for either side more difficult than in the past, even in moments of crisis. Furthermore, social media puts all events in China–U.S. relations in a near “live broadcast” state: once crises occur,

voices advocating confrontation gain momentum, which in turn greatly constrain room for concession and make any crisis difficult to manage.

The need to manage China–U.S. “strategic competition” is rooted in the uncertainty of future bilateral relations. The next 4 to 8 years will be critical for both sides. During this time period, the next model of interaction and new nature of bilateral relations will be defined. As for what kind of framework should be set up for this relationship, the answer is open ended. So far, there have been many debates and suggestions on this in the U.S., with proposals such as “Cold War”, “new Cold War”, “decoupling”, and “clash of civilizations” being put forward. Some of these suggestions are very worrisome and mutually harmful, and the uncertainty between the two sides needs to be managed.

China in recent years has been advocating a new model of major-country relationship between China and the United States to avoid the so-called “Thucydides Trap”. Such a course will not be smooth without intentional and careful management. The key features of this new model of major-country relationship are non-conflict and non-confrontation, which cannot be achieved if “strategic competition” is not well managed. There is no doubt that managing China–U.S. “strategic competition” is the only way to build a new model of major country relationship.

5 Managing “strategic competition”: the possible approaches

In July and August of 2020, Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi emphasized on different occasions the importance and necessity of avoiding strategic misjudgments and managing disputes between China and the United States. In view of this, how should the two sides manage China–U.S. “strategic competition”?

First, China and the United States should draw experience and lessons from the Cold War era. Admittedly, the China–U.S. relationship is completely different from the Soviet–U.S. relationship during the Cold War in terms of its nature and substance. The Cold War was a comprehensive and systematic confrontation between two camps led, respectively, by the United States and the Soviet Union, with each isolated from the other, very limited economic and personnel exchanges between the two, and both locked in fierce arms races and regular arms control negotiations. The danger that the Cold War might develop into a hot war was real and huge. For now, the Sino–U.S. relationship is very different from the Cold War-era Soviet–U.S. relationship. Both China and the United States can and should avoid that kind of relationship, regardless what kind of form it may take, be it “cool war”, “new Cold War”, or “Cold War 2.0” (Kupchan 2019; Bader 2020; Dilanian 2020).

Why did the Cold War not turn into a hot war? On the one hand, both the United States and the Soviet Union maintained large nuclear arsenals capable of mutual assured destruction. On the other hand, the two countries created and maintained a series of mechanisms to address disputes, negotiate agreements, and manage crises. These mechanisms guaranteed arms race stability and crisis stability between the

United States and the Soviet Union for several decades. All of these mechanisms were developed immediately after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the two countries to the brink of a nuclear war. China and the United States need not and should not repeat what happened in the past.

China and the United States can learn from how the United States and the Soviet Union engaged with each other over strategic issues. For example, the U.S. and the Soviet Union reached agreements over a series of rules and norms that guided the way they engaged and encountered one other. Confidence-building measures helped both avoid worse scenarios. The two sides also negotiated many agreements on arms control and disarmament; made arrangements for inspection, verification, and transparency; and established mechanisms to address disputes. By contrast, the Trump administration was rather reckless in demanding that China participate in trilateral nuclear arms control talks with the United States and Russia (Fu 2020).

Second, it is necessary for China and the U.S. to sort out issue areas in which there are differences and disputes and to create conditions to solve or manage them. The Sino-U.S. relationship is very complicated, and the two sides have both cooperation and differences on bilateral, regional, and multilateral issues. These issue areas can be divided into different zones, just like traffic lights. Areas involving politically sensitive issues like sovereignty and ideology and in which there is hardly any room for compromise can be categorized into a “red zone”. Areas involving misperception, misinterpretation, and misjudgment that are negotiable or solvable can be categorized into a “yellow zone”. When the bilateral relationship was relatively weak, many issues were interlinked, and disputes in one area could affect the overall state of the relationship. Now that the bilateral relationship has become very complex, disputes on individual issues should not be allowed to affect other aspects of the relationship.

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his remarks at the China–U.S. Think Tanks Media Forum on September 7, 2020, called for the restoration and restart of dialogue mechanisms at all levels and in all areas. He suggested that the two sides sit down together, go over issue areas, and draw up three lists of interactions: list of cooperation areas, list of dialogues, list of issues that need proper management (Wang 2020b). This is a constructive proposal from the Chinese side. It would be helpful to shelve “red zone” issues that are difficult to solve in the short term and to solve “yellow zone” issues through dialogue, bringing them into the “green zone” rather than allowing them to slip into the “red zone” because of neglect and misconduct. Wang Yi also stressed that finger-pointing will not resolve any problems. Yang Jiechi penned an article and underlined the importance of “managing differences in a constructive manner” as well (Yang 2020, 6).

Third, China and the U.S. should try to incorporate disputes and crisis management into existing diplomatic and security dialogue mechanisms at all levels. In the past four decades, many consultation and communication mechanisms have been established. Some of them involve multiple government departments and focus on solving major issues concerning the overall state of bilateral relations, while others focus on specific issue areas and involve discussions, consultations, or negotiations between departments on each side. After Trump took office, the two countries reorganized and set up four high-level dialogue mechanisms: the diplomatic and security

dialogue, the comprehensive economic dialogue, the law enforcement and cybersecurity dialogue, and the social and people-to-people exchange dialogue. In the past, China's Foreign Ministry and the U.S. State Department established many dialogue mechanisms covering almost all diplomatic issues and regions. The two militaries also developed consultation mechanisms on defense issues, such as the Defense Policy Coordination Talks, the Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue, the Joint Staff Dialogue Mechanism, the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, and the China–U.S. Disaster Management Exchange.

Some of these dialogue mechanisms were created in the process of handling disputes and differences, and some were established to deepen bilateral relations. In the last several years, the U.S. has repeatedly stressed that the dialogues should be “results-oriented”, which sounds very contradictory. Dialogue itself has merit in clarifying policies and positions, enhancing mutual understanding, and alleviating or solving differences. In order to ensure the overall stability of bilateral relations, the two sides need to reactivate dialogue mechanisms that have been dormant, reorganize others, and at the same time incorporate crisis management into existing dialogue mechanisms.

Fourth, China and the U.S. should implement agreements that are immediately relevant to confidence-building measures, negotiate to reach new agreements, and establish new mechanisms to cover all issue areas. So far, the two sides have signed several agreements for this purpose. In January 1998, the U.S. Defense Secretary and the Chinese Defense Minister signed the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement to promote talks between the two navies. In June 2013, President Xi Jinping and President Barack Obama reached consensus on the building of a new model of the military relationship between the two sides. Later, the two militaries carried out close negotiations and cooperated on confidence-building measures mechanisms and signed two memorandums of understanding soon afterwards. In 2015, the two sides negotiated an annex to the Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism to improve military crisis communication and an annex on air encounters to the Memorandum of Understanding Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters. The institutional exchanges between the two countries' defense departments, navies, armies, and air forces have strengthened their ability to manage disputes and crises.

These mechanisms played a significant role in the overall stability of the bilateral relationship in the past, thus it is equally, if not more, important for both sides to maintain and extend these dialogue and communication mechanisms in the context of “strategic competition”. Considering the fact that many accidents, incidents, and crises have taken place in the past, it is also important for academic communities and government agencies to review and analyze past events and draw lessons from them so that future misjudgment and miscalculation can be avoided (Zhang 2016, 2019).

Fifth, the two countries should keep dialogue and communication channels open at all levels so that clear signals can be sent out through official or unofficial means. As mentioned above, many functional or strategic dialogue mechanisms have been established between China and the U.S.; these are important platforms to enhance

mutual understanding and resolve differences. It is very important to keep these dialogue channels open, regardless of whether the China–U.S. relationship is in a generally negative or generally positive state. Certainly, dialogue and communication mechanisms themselves are not equivalent to solving problems. However, it will be harder to solve problems without them. Generally speaking, hotlines are important channels in tough times. So far, a number of hotlines have been set up between China and the United States, including those between the heads of state and those between the U.S. Defense Department and China’s Ministry of National Defense. Given that the China–U.S. relationship has entered a new phase and “strategic competition” is the new normal, it is extremely important for the two sides to keep the hotlines open for the purpose of managing competition and preventing crisis. Once a crisis arises, the two sides can communicate immediately through the hotlines to stabilize the situation and then deescalate the crisis as soon as possible. As mentioned above, the communications between the two militaries in late October 2020 and early January 2021 show how important it is to keep channels open.

Other than official dialogue and communications, the importance of track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues should not be underestimated. When conditions are not ready for official dialogues, semi-official or unofficial communication can be effective in exploring ways to solve problems and provide buffer space for official dialogues. The China–U.S. Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue jointly sponsored by the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies and the Pacific Forum CSIS over the last two decades was a good example of this. Although China and the U.S. are both nuclear powers, they are quite different in their nuclear development and deployment, definition of the role played by nuclear weapons in national security strategy, handling of nonproliferation challenges, and management of arms control and disarmament issues. When official nuclear dialogue was not possible, the track 1.5 dialogue carried out in Beijing offered an alternative. The dialogue did not solve the differences on nuclear issues between China and the U.S., but it did play a positive role in building confidence, enhancing mutual understanding, promoting cooperation, and alleviating disputes (Roberts 2020). This is exactly what dialogue and communication mechanisms are meant to accomplish.

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