

U.S.-China Competition Need Not Entrap South Korea in A New Cold War

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Political and economic rivalry between the United States and China is intensifying, but a new Cold War is not inevitable. Competitive cooperation in the political, economic, and even military realm can mitigate rivalry somewhat. The risk of war is still low, even in the potential flashpoint of the Taiwan Strait, held in check by deterrence, conventional as well as nuclear. Yet deterrence alone will not suffice. It needs to be supplemented by reassurance in the form of competitive cooperation especially in the nuclear realm. Caught between its U.S. ally and its Chinese neighbor, South Korea has an interest in trying to encourage competitive cooperation, where possible.

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Nowhere does the rise of China exert a greater potential impact than on the Korean Peninsula.

China is far and away South Korea's most important trading partner and at the same time an aspiring regional hegemon. As the United States reacts to China's rise, their competition is certain to increase friction with Seoul, which by virtue of its geographic and economic position has an interest in avoiding entrapment in a new cold war between Washington and Beijing.

For North Korea, China is both next-door neighbor and sometime ally. Yet throughout the Cold War, the DPRK sought to play off the Soviet Union against China in order to maintain some semblance of freedom of action.¹ In 1988, faced with the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, Kim Il Sung reached out to the United States, South Korea, and Japan in order to hedge against too great a dependence on China for its political, economic, and security well-being. DPRK diplomats even used to speak of having the United States as an "ally" and letting U.S. forces remain in the Demilitarized Zone as "peacekeepers" between the North and the South. As long as a fundamentally new U.S.-DPRK relationship is still a goal of Kim Jong Un, that leaves the way open to negotiated restraints on its nuclear and missile programs.

For now, the growing rivalry between China and the United States remains primarily a political and economic competition. Yet that rivalry contains the seeds of confrontation as domestic political pressures in both countries are pushing them toward ideological, racial, and even military antagonism, the essential elements of a new cold war.

A new cold war in Asia would pose potentially profound complications for both Koreas. It is not inevitable, however.² Even as the political and economic

1 Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

2 For a review of the literature on the potential for armed conflict, M. Taylor Fravel, "International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (2020): 505-32. For a Chinese view, Wu Xinbo, "The China Challenge: Competitor

competition heats up, it need not explode into open hostility. There are opportunities for competitive cooperation to mitigate conflict. Caught between its U.S. ally and its Chinese neighbor, South Korea has an interest in encouraging this alternative path.

I . Political Competition

China is openly challenging U.S. conceptions of international order as well as its global political and economic leadership not only in Northeast Asia but also in Southeast Asia, Africa, and other far-flung regions, even in Latin America. The political competition is evident, for instance, in Chinese global climate efforts after President Donald Trump backed out of the Paris Climate Agreement, opening the way to China's claim of leadership on the issue.

The intensity of political partisanship in the United States and nationalism in China are driving their competition, which suggests that it will not diminish any time soon. And there are worrisome signs that officials on both sides harbor a darker vision of the rivalry. Many in Washington characterize China as acting in the grip of aggressive nationalism. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for instance, reacting to China's clash with India in the Himalayas by ignoring their past interactions, accused the Chinese of taking "incredibly aggressive action."³ Many in Beijing believe that the United States is in irreversible decline. As China's Yang Jiechi, director of Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, put it undiplomatically to Secretary of State Antony Blinken in their very first meeting in Alaska, "The United States does not have the qualification ... to speak to China from a position of strength."⁴

Or Order Transformer," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 99-114.

3 Humeyra Pamuk and Jonathan Landay, "Pompeo Says China Took 'Incredibly Aggressive Action' in Recent Clash with India," Reuters, July 8, 2020.

4 U.S., Department of State, Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang and State Councilor Wang at the Top of Their Meeting, Anchorage, Alaska, March 18, 2021.

Alliances give the United States a major advantage over China – a "position of strength" in Yang's words – in this political competition. In East Asia, however, the legacy of occupation poses a challenge for South Korea in making common cause with Japan against China's growing political assertiveness.

Yet the U.S.-China political relationship is not one of unmitigated rivalry. Areas of potential cooperation coexist alongside competition. For instance, after covering up the extent of its COVID outbreak, the Chinese quickly shared the genetic data that enabled the rapid U.S. development of vaccines.⁵ It also supported U.S. efforts to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Examples like these suggest that such competitive cooperation is a way to ease political rivalry.

Competitive cooperation. North Korea is a case in point. The United States wants China's help to pressure the North, with mixed success. China does oppose the DPRK's development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles as endangering its own security. Far from a reduction in the U.S. presence in Northeast Asia that China seeks, North Korean nuclear and missile advances have prompted a strengthening of U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan, the deployment of anti-missile defenses in the region, and U.S. nuclear modernization. Even worse, these advances, if unchecked, could eventually lead Japan and South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Those concerns made China willing to support U.N. Security Council sanctions against the North. At the same time, it is aware of the Kim dynasty's longstanding desire for a fundamental improvement in U.S. relations to counteract China's rise. And it does not want instability in the North that could set off a surge of refugees, or worse, the collapse of the regime. That has made it inclined to back U.S. diplomatic efforts, including past U.N. Security Council resolutions, but to oppose U.S. imposition of tougher sanctions, never mind threats of force, and to resist U.S. assertion of extraterritoriality in threatening financial sanctions against Chinese banks. In short, U.S.-China cooperation on North Korea is possible but limited.

5 Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, "China Releases Genetic Data on New Coronavirus, Now Deadly," January 11, 2022.

Another recent example of competitive cooperation is vaccine diplomacy, as evident in China's provision of Sinovac and the substantial U.S. offer of vaccines. So is the U.S. proposal of a temporary waiver of drug-makers' intellectual property rights for COVID vaccines developed with government support, but that waiver may fall short of meeting global needs unless U.S. manufacturers help set up vaccine factories abroad and scores of suppliers around the globe provide the necessary 200-odd components for vaccine production. Competitive cooperation is also apparent in the Biden administration's robust response to China's environmental efforts and its proposed increases in foreign aid and development bank funding—the most recent examples of doing well by doing good.

It is in South Korea's interest to encourage these and other forms of U.S.-China political cooperation wherever possible, perhaps with the help of other like-minded middle powers. For, instance, Seoul might propose a joint U.S.-China supply of COVID vaccines to Mongolia and Southeast Asia.

II. Economic Competition

Of greater concern to Seoul than the political competition is the intensifying economic rivalry between the United States and China, symbolized by China's Belt and Road Initiative, U.S. pressure to counter Huawei's growing dominance in telecommunications, and above all, the exchange of retaliatory tariffs that target global supply chains and impose higher costs on South Korea's manufacturing inputs and other imports.

President Trump's abrupt refusal to join the nascent Trans-Pacific Partnership was a blow to U.S. allies in Asia, opening the door to the formation of the Asia Pacific Trade Agreement that underscored Beijing's growing trade dominance in the region. It was accompanied by China's founding of the Asian Development Bank, a direct challenge to U.S. aid efforts, as well as to the U.S. role in global rule-setting and potentially to U.S. assertion of extraterritoriality in enforcing its financial sanctions against North Korea.

China, meanwhile, was not above flexing economic muscle of its own,

as it showed after South Korea's decision to buttress its alliance with the United States by deploying the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) on its soil. China was even willing to coerce North Korea economically – albeit within limits.

Economic interdependence, far from damping conflict as some scholars believe, exposed areas of friction. The loss of manufacturing jobs and fears of China's technological challenge inspired a sharp protectionist reaction in the United States symbolized by the Trump tariff war and the Biden Buy American campaign. Yet these economic drivers of conflict are weakening. The Biden Administration is determined to "build back better" by focusing its attention on the economic rejuvenation of the United States, not on a trade war with China. More fundamentally, far from becoming an increasingly globalized economy, the United States' rate of growth in manufacturing trade, including imports, is low and declining. So is its rate of employment in manufacturing.⁶ Service industries, far and away the largest source of U.S. job growth, are largely homebound and, with some exceptions, like finance, remain relatively impervious to outsourcing or competition from abroad. Similarly, technological development depends on brainpower, and the United States has benefited enormously from foreigners, even from China, who come to study in U.S. universities and stay on to introduce innovations. China, by contrast, attracts far less immigrant brainpower and sometimes resorts to theft of intellectual property to compensate for its technological disadvantages. So long as the United States sustains its private and public investment in brainpower, specifically education, science, and basic research, technological advance and trade, may weaken further as catalysts for conflict.

As a trading nation, South Korea has a sizable stake in easing economic competition by stressing the need for freer trade and resisting pressures to join in sanctions. It ranked sixth in the world in exports and ninth in imports in 2019. In the course of that pre-COVID year, China accounted for 25.1 percent of its exports and 21.3 of its imports and the United States 13.6 and 12.3 respectively. Its pivotal role in global supply chains leaves Seoul vulnerable

6 Adam S. Posen, "The Price of Nostalgia," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 3 (May/June 2021).

to competitive tariffs and other conflicts between its top two trading partners.

Will the "Chinese dream" of Xi Jinping become Korea's nightmare? Not necessarily. It depends on the extent to which today's political and economic competition assume ideological, racial, and above all, military dimensions in the future.

III. Ideological Differences

Ideology, not *realpolitik*, was the driving force behind the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. By contrast, the ideological fervor that fueled U.S.-China hostility during the Cold War dissipated somewhat in the post-Mao era when Deng Xiaoping put his country on a capitalist road. Yet China's authoritarian rule, as well as its repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong has rekindled the U.S. campaign for democracy and human rights. Beijing has assertively rebuffed U.S. criticism of its internal affairs. And its leaders perceive an ideological threat from Washington.⁷

South Korea has rightly voiced support for democracy and human rights and has long demonstrated its commitment to these values at home but has been loath to join in an anti-China crusade.

IV. Racism

Racial animosity is a potential source of U.S.-China antagonism.

President Trump's characterization of COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" was a catalyst for an upsurge in violent attacks on Asian-Americans across the country. The experience of racial slights – microaggressions in the current vernacular – could also embitter students from Asia who return home with distrust for Americans.

⁷ Aijun Tang, *Ideological Security in the Overall Framework of Overall National Security Outlook* (Beijing: Central Party School, 2019), trans. Jude Blanchette (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2020).

Flare-ups of anti-Asian sentiment are not new. The United States has a long history of legal oppression of Asians as well as Blacks and indigenous peoples. Legal impediments to immigration from China and the rest of East Asia date back to the Page Act of 1875, which prohibited the recruitment of laborers, especially women, from "China, Japan or any Oriental country," to be followed shortly thereafter by the Angell Treaty of 1880 that allowed the United States to suspend immigration from China, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that barred all immigration from China, legislation not repealed until 1943. Fears of a "yellow peril" is a persistent undercurrent in Americans' perceptions of China.

For its part, China's persecution of the Uyghurs and the Nepalis is motivated in no small part by Han ethnocentrism – an ethnocentrism also nourished by bitter memories of Western colonialism.

South Korea is not free of its own ethnocentrism. Yet it has an interest in raising its voice against racism whether it affects Korean-American citizens of the United States or Turkic citizens of China.

V. Military Competition

A new cold war would require intensification of U.S.-China military competition. The potential for militarization of the rivalry is evident in China's assertive maritime claims in the East and South China Seas and the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad to counter them. Composed of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, the Quad has called for "a shared vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and a "rules-based maritime order."⁸ To the extent that it moves toward becoming a full-blown alliance, it will likely engender political unease in Tokyo and Delhi and pose a serious dilemma for Seoul, which understandably seeks to maintain its security pact with Washington while not going out of its way to antagonize Beijing. In

8 U.S., Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, November 4, 2019.

an obvious inducement for Seoul's support, Washington has said that the Quad is not a security alliance – "not an Asian NATO," in the words of one official.⁹

The current state of the U.S.-China military competition can be seen in their acquisition of new arms, their interactions in the Taiwan Strait, and, perhaps most worrisome of all, their nuclear weapons developments.

The Military Buildup. To build up its armed forces, China is acquiring modern weaponry, much of it devoted to asymmetric warfare by exploiting advances in missiles as well as cyber, anti-satellite weapons, and artificial intelligence that would disrupt U.S. command, control, communications, and intelligence in any conflict. It is also moving beyond a littoral defense to begin building a blue-water navy. Its military budget at \$181 billion is now the second largest in the world, but U.S. defense spending is still five times greater. And that spending buys superior stealthier aircraft, quieter submarines, a much larger navy, and more advanced cyber.

South Korea, for its part, has significantly stepped up its own defense spending in recent years. It attempts to avoid antagonizing China by justifying its procurements as countering North Korea or readying its forces for the transfer of wartime OPCON from the United States. The Ministry of National Defense requested \$43.7 billion for 2021, a 5.4 percent increase over the previous year. Spending increased 7.0, 8.2, and 7.4 percent in the previous three years, the most of any U.S. ally. South Korea is developing a homegrown KF-X jet fighter, a new attack submarine, a surface-to-air missile, a medium-range ballistic missile of its own capable of targeting all of North Korea, an unmanned reconnaissance aircraft, and a Kill Chain and Korean Air and Missile Defense System that couple surveillance and preemptive capabilities – all weapons which are useful against China.

Deterrence helps ensure that the risk of premeditated war between the United States and China seems very low today, but public fears may be stoked

9 Yonhap, "Quad Is Neither Security Alliance Nor Asian NATO: White House Official," May 7, 2021.

as military organizations in both countries engage in a never-ending bureaucratic struggle for more resources by exaggerating threats posed by the other side. While it is difficult to envision a role for the U.S. Army, China's Peoples' Liberation Army, or either side's air forces in a conventional war with the other side, the same is not the case for their navies. Rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait and over competing claims in the South China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands favor greater priority for naval budgets, given their prominent role in protecting sea lanes. Threat-mongering is further driven by the internal rivalry between the Chinese PLA Navy and the Chinese Coast Guard. Yet anti-ship guided missiles and submarines would imperil both surface fleets and invading forces, especially in a key flashpoint, the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan: In Dire Straits? Taiwan is one place where tensions might explode. Its thriving democracy provides a political counterpoint to China's one-party autocracy. Its citizens show scant willingness to subject themselves to Beijing's current rule even if they are of two minds about declaring independence.

Three diplomatic agreements between the United States have forestalled but not resolved the issue. In the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, "the United States acknowledged that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position." The 1979 communiqué establishing diplomatic relations, recognized Beijing "as the sole legal Government of China," adding that "the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other *unofficial* relations with the people of Taiwan." Congress thereupon enacted the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act by overwhelming majorities making it U.S. policy to "consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States" and "to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan." A third communiqué in 1982 acknowledged that "the question of Taiwan is China's internal affairs," asserting that the United States had "no

intention of infringing on China's sovereignty or territorial integrity, or interfering in China's internal affairs, or pursuing a policy of 'two Chinas' or 'one China, one Taiwan,'" and pledged "gradually to reduce its sale of arms to Taiwan, leading, over a period of time, to a final resolution." President Clinton went a step further, reassuring China's leader Jiang Zemin in their October 1995 summit meeting that future visits with Taiwan's leadership would be "unofficial, private and rare" and saying privately that Washington opposed Taiwan's independence but would not state this publicly.¹⁰

Despite these diplomatic commitments, the Obama administration sold PAC-3 missile defense batteries to Taiwan and upgraded its F-16s but refused to sell it the latest F-16 model. When the Trump administration approved the sale of sixty-six advanced F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan in August 2019, China apparently reacted by stepping up air and naval patrols to the island's waters and airspace. While the Trump administration continued to discourage Taiwan's independence, it relaxed restrictions on top Taiwanese officials' stays in the United States and visits by U.S. officials to Taiwan. In August 2020, a Cabinet member became the highest-level American official in decades to set foot in Taipei, followed in short order by an undersecretary of state and a rear admiral. Congress enacted a provision encouraging the secretary of defense to arrange "exchanges of senior military officers." The Biden administration invited Taiwan's representative in Washington to the president's inauguration for the first time ever, but so far it has been careful to maintain strategic ambiguity,¹¹ pledging to "continue to assist Taiwan in maintaining a sufficient self-defense capability" while reaffirming past diplomatic commitments to China in an effort to restrain both Beijing and Taipei.

For its part, while China currently lacks the ability to mount an amphibious assault of Taiwan, it has never forgone the use of force. It passed an Anti-Secession Law in 2005 stating it could use "non-peaceful means" if the

10 Robert S. Ross, "The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 96.

11 Reuters, "U.S.: Strategic Clarity of Taiwan Policy Carries 'Significant Downsides,'" May 5, 2021.

Taiwanese sought independence or if the chance of peaceful reunification was "completely exhausted." In reaction to U.S. political and military cooperation, China sent aircraft across the median in the Taiwan Strait, the unofficial boundary, in March 2019 and again in September 2020, and stepped up the tempo of its military exercises.¹² In January 2021, the National People's Congress enacted a law authorizing the coast guard to board and inspect foreign vessels in waters claimed by China using "all necessary means" and to establish temporary exclusion zones "as needed" to bar their entry.¹³ In theory, that law could be invoked to assert its sovereign control over Taiwan in response to U.S. arms shipments to the islands.

So long as Washington continues to dissuade Taiwan from seeking independence, Beijing remains confident that its economic growth and relatively stable cultural and economic ties with Taipei has put it on a path to eventual unification. A 2015 defense white paper characterized cross-Strait relations as having "sustained a sound momentum of peaceful development" even as it acknowledged that the "root cause of instability has not yet been removed." Following the election of pro-independence candidate Tsai Ing-wen as Taiwan's president in 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping was quoted as saying, "Fundamentally, the development of [the] cross-Strait relationship hinges on the development and progress of the motherland, mainland China."¹⁴

Taiwan, by itself, is no match for the mainland militarily. Yet, as the communiqués and U.S. legislation suggest, a direct attempt to seize Taiwan would run an incalculable risk of war with the United States. As a recent RAND study concludes, "China's motivation to attack Taiwan has *declined* in recent years, owing to China's increasing optimism about its prospects; confidence in its ascendant position relative to Taiwan; and preoccupation

12 Steven Lee Myers, "China Sends Warning to Taiwan and U.S. With Big Show of Air Power," *New York Times*, September 18, 2020.

13 Yew Lun Tian, "China Authorizes Coast Guard to Fire on Foreign Vessels as Needed," Reuters, January 22, 2021.

14 Quoted in Zhang Zhijun, "Maintaining and Promoting Peaceful Development of Cross-Strait Relations to Jointly Materialize Chinese People's Great Dream of Rejuvenation of China," *Seeking Truth*, October 15, 2016.

with more pressing priorities, such as the transformation of the economy's mode of development and party strife incurred by Chinese President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive."¹⁵

Even if nuclear deterrence might make the risk of war prohibitively costly for both sides, it might not preclude military intimidation short of outright war. China has often sought to flex its military muscle to put pressure on Taiwan even though such intimidation has backfired politically in the past, stirring anti-mainland resentment, if not pro-independence enthusiasm among Taiwanese voters.

Actions short of a direct attack like the seizure of one of Taiwan's small offshore islands or a naval quarantine of the island to curtail arms trade have raised concern in some quarters. One astute analysis proposes that instead of a counterblockade that would unduly impede global trade, or an outright attack on Chinese ships that might lead to war, the United States might deter such actions by responding, as it did in Berlin in 1948, by circumventing the quarantine to airlift aid to Taiwan and, as President Lincoln did at Fort Sumter or President Kennedy did during the Cuban missile crisis, shifting the onus of starting a war to Beijing. It could back up this move by cutting off global dollar transactions with China.¹⁶

Sizable U.S. military forces based in South Korea and Japan would likely be involved in any such Taiwan contingency. That raises the stakes for Seoul, which officially acknowledged that in the Biden-Moon joint statement after their May 21, 2021 summit meeting. Tokyo has remained coy about its commitment to the island nation. When President Biden met with Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide in April 2021 in his first White House summit meeting, the joint statement read, "We oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea. We reiterated our objections to China's

15 Michael J. Mazarr, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Timothy R. Heath, and Derek Eaton, *What Deters and Why: The State of Deterrence in Korea and the Taiwan Strait* (Santa Monica, RAND, 2021), 41-42 (Emphasis added).

16 Robert D. Blackwell and Philip Zelikow, *The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), 42-45.

unlawful maritime claims and activities in the South China Sea and reaffirmed our strong shared interest in a free and open South China Sea governed by international law, in which freedom of navigation and overflight are guaranteed, consistent with the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea.¹⁷ When Suga was asked about the omission of Taiwan, he was evasive, acknowledging that the two leaders had discussed the issue and "reaffirmed" the importance of "peace and stability" in the Taiwan Strait, but refusing to give further details.¹⁸ Seoul is likely to share his reluctance to clarify in public a commitment to Taiwan's defense.

Despite the lack of strategic clarity on both sides, deterrence is still likely to hold in the Taiwan Strait, perhaps because of a reciprocal threat that leaves something to chance.

Nuclear Risks. Notwithstanding the low likelihood of premeditated war, both the United States and China are producing new and improved nuclear weapons, posing the risk that in any intense crisis, if war were to erupt, it could quickly escalate.¹⁹ That risk is further exacerbated by advances in missile accuracy, antimissile defenses, cyber, and space technology, as well as efforts to limit damage from retaliation in the event of a nuclear exchange. As both sides move to bolster deterrence, the pernicious interaction of their forces is potentially worrisome. It is in the nuclear realm that the greatest need for competitive cooperation lies.

The United States has roughly 3,800 nuclear warheads, some 1,800 of which are currently deployed, 400 of them on land-based intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs), 1,000 on submarines-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and 300 gravity bombs and air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs)

17 White House, U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement: U.S.-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era, April 16, 2021.

18 White House, Remarks of President Biden and Prime Minister Suga of Japan at Press Conference, April 16, 2021.

19 For Chinese views on the likelihood of escalation, Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Dangerous Confidence: Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 61-109.

not loaded on strategic bombers but stored at air bases around the country. It can increase the number of independently targetable warheads on its ICBMs and SLBMs if it so chooses. It currently plans to deploy a new B-21 strategic bomber and a new sea-launched cruise missile, to extend the life of its Trident SLBMs and to build new Columbia-class submarines to carry them, as well as to develop a new ICBM, designated the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent, and a new Long-Range Stand-Off cruise missile.²⁰ It has deployed Aegis systems on at least 17 U.S. Navy destroyers and cruisers in the Asia-Pacific that can track, target, and engage short-(SRBMs), medium- (MRBMs), and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in either the midcourse or terminal phase of flight. Aegis can also help defend the U.S. homeland by detecting and tracking Chinese ICBMs and transmitting this data to cue Ground-Based Interceptors in Alaska and California. It is also deploying SM-3 Block IIA interceptors with an extended range and higher velocity than the current SM-3s. It has deployed the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system in Pearl Harbor. Intended to defend against strategic threats, the GMD has a phased array X-band radar with a 2,500-mile range and is supposed to track incoming missiles, discriminate between warheads and decoys or countermeasures, and relay this data to interceptors. To engage missiles in the terminal phase of flight, U.S. and South Korean forces operate several U.S.-made ballistic missile defense platforms on Korean soil to defend against short- and medium-range North Korean missiles, including a U.S.-operated THAAD battery and several U.S.- and South Korean-operated Patriot batteries on land.²¹ THAAD's associated radars can also cue anti-missile defenses in the U.S. homeland.

Advances in U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities and potential improvements in anti-missile defenses to put China's nuclear retaliation at risk²² have triggered a reaction from Beijing – a buildup of new SLBMs and

20 Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, "United States Nuclear Weapons, 2021," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 77, no. 1 (2021): 43-63.

21 Arms Control Association, Fact Sheet: U.S. and Allied Ballistic Missile Defenses in the Asia-Pacific Region, January 2019.

22 Katrina Hanson and Christian Shepherd, "U.S. Military Puts Space Weapons in

mobile ICBMs and IRBMs – to assure its ability to retaliate, as well as the development of a THAAD-like anti-missile system of its own. China's IRBMs can target South Korea, depending on where in China they are based. Its nuclear arsenal, the third largest in the world but still less than a fifth of the U.S. deployed total, consists of about 350 warheads, 272 of them mounted on 240 land-based ballistic missiles, some 90 of which can reach targets in Asia and 150 of which can reach part of the U.S. mainland while another 48 are sea-based, and 20 gravity bombs. The other 78 warheads will arm missiles that are yet to be fielded. It is fielding two new ballistic missile submarines, replacing older road-mobile launchers that carry solid-fueled D-31 ICBMs and DF-35 IRBMs with improved off-road capability, and eventually deploying new DF-41 missiles equipped with multiple-targeted reentry vehicles.²³

Most of China's forces are maintained on low alert, with warheads thought to be held separately from their launchers, consistent with its stated policy of no first use. Nevertheless, the general in charge of the U.S. Strategic Command, trying to underscore the need for new U.S. nuclear forces instead of interpreting Beijing's build-up as a reaction to U.S. nuclear developments, has warned the Senate Armed Services Committee of a "breathhtaking" expansion of Chinese nuclear capabilities and a possible shift toward a "launch-under-warning" posture.²⁴

Although the number of weapons being produced is not necessarily destabilizing, several qualitative developments are more worrisome. The increased accuracy of both conventional and nuclear forces, as well as the introduction of artificial intelligence and cyber, will put both sides' land-based missiles and intelligence down-links in greater jeopardy, raising risks of inadvertent or unintended war. For instance, the United States plans to build

Its Sights to Counter China," *Financial Times*, September 3, 2020, p. 4.

23 Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2020," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 76, no. 6 (2020): 443-57.

24 Bill Gertz, "China Engaged in 'Breathhtaking' Nuclear Expansion, STRATCOM Commander Warns," *Washington Times*, April 20, 2021.

highly accurate theater-based intermediate-range missiles that ostensibly will be conventionally-armed and to deploy lower-yield warheads aboard Trident submarines.

These plans are based on two fundamentally flawed assumptions: that deterrence can be relied upon never to fail and that a nuclear war, if fought, can be limited. Yet political leaders' capacity to control the use of nuclear weapons in an intense crisis or during a war, always suspect, has become all the more precarious with both sides' growing potential for cyberattacks²⁵ and anti-satellite weapons to disrupt command, control, communication, and intelligence. New hypersonic weapons under development in both countries could further aggravate crisis instability by drastically reducing how long they take to reach their targets—the so-called flash-to-bang time.²⁶ Distinguishing conventionally-armed from nuclear-armed hypersonic missiles or lower- from higher-yield warheads in the heat of the moment could also prove difficult.

To head off a qualitative arms race and ease paranoia, deterrence needs to be supplemented by reassurance. A starting point might be for President Biden to repeat what he said as vice president in the waning days of the Obama administration:

Given our non-nuclear capabilities and the nature of today's threats, it's hard to envision a plausible scenario in which the first use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be necessary or make sense. President Obama and I are confident we can deter and defend ourselves and our allies against non-nuclear threats through other means. The next administration will put forward its own policies. But seven years after the Nuclear Posture Review charge, the President and I strongly believe we have made enough progress that deterring and if necessary, retaliating against a nuclear attack should be the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.²⁷

25 Daryl K. Press, "NC3 and Crisis Stability – Growing Dangers in the 21st Century," *NAPSnet*, October 17, 2019.

26 John T. Watts, Christian Trotti, and Mark J. Massa. *Hypersonic Weapons in the Indo-Pacific Region* (Washington: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, 2020).

The next step would be for him to acknowledge mutual vulnerability, a step no U.S. president has yet taken vis-à-vis China.

Reassurance could also take one of two forms of competitive cooperation: quantitative arms control or strategic stability dialogue. Given the disparity in nuclear forces, China is likely to continue to resist involvement in negotiations on quantitative limits, but it may be willing to engage in a sustained strategic stability dialogue, especially between defense officials. Nuclear doctrine and policy are worth exploring. So are developments in cyber, space, artificial intelligence, and hypersonic weaponry. A bilateral working group on cyber issues agreed to at the 2013 Sunnylands Summit meeting between presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping shows both the possibility of dialogue and the difficulty of sustaining it.²⁸ One useful topic for future discussion is the prevention of cyber penetration by third parties. China will certainly want to hear about U.S. anti-missile defenses, just as Washington would benefit from learning about Beijing's offensive capabilities. Confidence-building measures such as additional hotlines and information-exchanges are worth further consideration. Given U.S. anti-submarine capabilities, China may be reluctant to send its nuclear-carrying submarines far afield, so a no-go zone for U.S. attack submarines might bolster strategic stability. A more remote possibility is further constraints on the militarization of space, perhaps starting with a cooperative cleanup of space debris that imperils both sides' satellites. The extent to which China is willing to engage in such dialogues remains to be seen.

South Korea has an interest in encouraging such cooperation. Instead, public discourse in some Seoul circles has focused on acquiring nuclear weapons of its own. Doing so would be a profound strategic error. While deterrent threats are usually understood as a way to prevent premeditated

27 White House, Remarks by the Vice President on Nuclear Security, Washington, D.C., January 11, 2017.

28 Ariel E. Levite, Lyu Jinghua, George Perkovich, Lu Chuanying, Xu Manshu, Li Bin, and Yang Fan, *China-U.S. Cyber-Nuclear C3 Stability* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Shanghai Institute for International Studies, April 2021), 14-15.

war, they can also provoke preemptive war. In an intense crisis in which one side or the other perceives war as imminent, that side may fear that a substantial portion of its military force is vulnerable to attack and be tempted to preempt – to shoot first as a last resort. If either side sees itself in such a predicament, then both sides are less secure for fear of preemption. Strategists call that crisis instability. Nuclear weapons gravely aggravate that risk. They can also engender arms race paranoia that can help trigger a new cold war in Asia.

Discussions of deterrence aside, a brief examination of the decision-making and operational demands of nuclear forces in Korea illuminates deeper problems. Budgetary constraints are likely to compel the South to continue to reduce its military manpower. Since commanders would have to divert significant conventional forces required for special handling of nuclear weapons and protecting storage sites from attack or sabotage, budgetary constraints also dictate that the weapons be located at fewer storage sites. Such constraints also dictate the deployment of dual-capable systems, artillery, short-range missiles, and aircraft capable of delivering either conventional or nuclear ordnance. Dual capability poses a predicament for commanders whether to deploy such forces or withhold them for possible nuclear use, a predicament that is most pointed when the battle is most intense and the outcome most uncertain – when conventional needs are most urgent. To compound that predicament, were they to withdraw their warheads from vulnerable storage sites to ready them for nuclear use, the enemy might interpret that move as a sign that nuclear war is imminent and launch a preemptive nuclear attack. Knowing that, a political leader may be reluctant to grant authority to disperse the warheads. Yet the enemy might feel compelled to attack even if authorization to prepare for nuclear use is delayed or denied. Most problematic of all, the enemy might mistake preparation of dual-capable weapons for conventional use as a portent of nuclear attack, triggering preemption.

Even if he receives authority to disperse nuclear weapons, a commander would have to decide whether to arm his aircraft or artillery, knowing that might set off a nuclear war. He would confront the same predicament that

Admiral Kimmel did at Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Kimmel understood the political imperative was to avoid initiating contact with the enemy fleet lest that trigger the first shot of the war. He knew that ordering the fleet out to sea would reduce its vulnerability to surprise attack. Once at sea, however, it would have to conduct reconnaissance flights to protect itself. The wider the range of these air patrols, the more likely they would make contact and either draw enemy fire or, even worse, fire the first shot if they feared being attacked.

Other dilemmas affect planning, tactics, and training of ground forces. No one has been able to integrate nuclear and conventional capabilities in a coherent military doctrine. For instance, training exercises that acclimate ground forces to a nuclear environment leaves them less capable of waging conventional war. Tanks and troops that practice dispersing for nuclear attack are less ready to mass for conventional assaults. Forces that prepare for nuclear first use in the event of an enemy conventional breakthrough may be less prepared to regroup for conventional battle. Such peacetime drills also look provocative to the other side.

Redeploying U.S. nuclear arms to the Korean Peninsula adds a further complication. Would a South Korean president be willing to allow U.S. dispersal of its nuclear weapons, never mind, first use of those forces? If he refused, might the weapons still be dispersed? If so, would the South Korean leader order ROK forces to prevent dispersal or use?

Deploying nuclear-armed missiles at sea might not alleviate these predicaments. Surface ships would be vulnerable to guided missile attack while nuclear-armed submarines might be too noisy to put out to open seas. If confined to nearby waters, they would be vulnerable to enemy attack submarines and their ability to communicate with national command authorities might be disrupted by cyber and antisatellite attacks.

In short, operational considerations call into question the utility of nuclear arming. South Korea's security might benefit more by encouraging the United States and China to engage in competitive cooperation in the nuclear realm, preserving deterrence of premeditated attack while reducing the risk of inadvertent war.

VI. Conclusion

As political and economic competition between the United States and China heats up, it is arousing fears of a new cold war in Asia. Such an outcome is not preordained. It requires a further intensification of the ideological, racial, and above all, military dimensions of their rivalry.

Competitive cooperation can damp down the rivalry and generate firebreaks in any escalation.

South Korea has a stake in averting another cold war by encouraging its U.S. ally and its Chinese neighbor to explore possibilities for such cooperation.

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