



## US–CHINA REASSURANCE: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Kai He

# About the Author

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He is a co-editor of “Cambridge Elements in Indo-Pacific Security,” a short-book series published by Cambridge University Press. He has authored or co-authored seven books and edited or co-edited eight volumes. Among his notable works are *After Hedging: Hard Choices for the Indo-Pacific States between the US and China* (co-authored with Huiyun Feng, Cambridge Elements in IR, 2023), *Contesting Revisionism: China, the United States, and Transformation of International Order* (co-authored with Steve Chan, Huiyun Feng, Weixing Hu, Oxford, 2021), *China’s Crisis Behavior: Political Survival and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, 2016), and *International Organizations and Peaceful Change in World Politics* (co-edited with T.V. Paul and Anders Wivel, Cambridge, 2025). His forthcoming book is *The Upside of U.S.-Chinese Strategic Competition: Institutional Balancing and Order Transition in the Asia Pacific* (co-authored with Huiyun Feng, Cambridge University Press, 2025).

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# Introduction

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The world is currently facing a polycrisis, characterized by overlapping and interconnected global challenges. The ongoing war in Ukraine and escalating military conflicts in the Middle East threaten international stability, while peace and security in the Asia–Pacific region are increasingly at risk due to intensifying US–China strategic competition. As the United States and China are both nuclear powers and pivotal actors in the Indo-Pacific, any potential military conflict between them would have catastrophic consequences with far-reaching implications for global stability.

In this increasingly volatile context, a strategic approach is urgently needed to stabilize bilateral relations and prevent military conflicts between the United States and China. This report underscores the necessity of “reassurance” as a conflict prevention measure to address the growing risk of military confrontation and preserve the fragile “East Asian Peace” amid intensifying strategic competition. Reducing the likelihood of conflict between the United States and China is the central research objective of the Toda Peace Institute’s first Research Cluster (TRC) on Northeast Asia. To achieve this objective, this report examines key theoretical and empirical dimensions of US–China reassurance, focusing on the following critical questions:

- What is reassurance?
- Why is reassurance necessary?
- How do states implement reassurance strategies in theory?
- How can the United States and China implement reassurance strategies toward each other?
- What are the challenges to achieving effective US–China reassurance?

This report<sup>[1]</sup> aims to provide actionable insights for mitigating tensions and fostering a more stable and cooperative relationship between the two great powers.

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[1] This is the first report from a series of Toda Research Clusters, established for the purpose of addressing matters related to preventive diplomacy, reassurance, conflict management and co-operation in Northeast Asia. It was written by Kai He, convenor of the Toda Research Cluster (TRC) on “US–China Reassurance,” which comprises three members: Carla Freeman, Joon Yong Park, and Bo Zhou. The TRC held two online meetings and a workshop in Tokyo, hosted by the Toda Peace Institute under the Chatham House Rule in 2024–2025. This report reflects the conclusions developed by Kai He as convenor and does not necessarily represent the views of individual participants.

# What is reassurance?

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Reassurance is a state policy or strategic approach aimed at reducing the risk of military conflict or war with adversaries. It operates by signalling benign intentions through clear and consistent messaging while engaging in actions that encourage reciprocal restraint. By reducing perceived threats and fostering mutual confidence, reassurance decreases the likelihood of escalation and the use of force.

Similar to deterrence, reassurance is a strategy for managing conflict and crises between adversaries (Stein 1991; Lebow 1987; Jervis 1978). However, the two strategies differ fundamentally in focus. Deterrence aims to prevent aggression by demonstrating defensive capability or threatening retaliation, whereas reassurance seeks to alleviate an adversary's suspicions by demonstrating peaceful intent.

Emphasizing the importance of reassurance does not imply denying the role of deterrence. It is crucial to recognize that reassurance and deterrence are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Some scholars (Schelling 1966; Christensen 2022; Glaser, Weiss, and Christensen 2024) have argued that deterrence cannot be fully successful without credible assurance or reassurance. Therefore, policymakers must understand how to conduct credible reassurance strategies to achieve effective deterrence and prevent unintended conflicts with adversaries.

In this context, it is important to distinguish between reassurance between adversaries and reassurance (or assurance) between partners or allies. Reassurance between adversaries aims to reduce misunderstandings and miscalculations to prevent unintended military conflicts, whereas reassurance or assurance between allies seeks to enhance partnership and cooperation. This report focuses on reassurance strategies between potential adversaries to avoid unnecessary military conflicts and wars.

## KEY FEATURES OF REASSURANCE:

- **Goal:** Minimize the likelihood of military conflicts and wars between adversaries.
- **Means:** Communicate and demonstrate a state's benign intentions and behaviours clearly and credibly.
- **Mechanism:** Foster belief in reassurance signals, encouraging adversaries to perceive the state's peaceful intentions. This reduces miscalculation and lowers the risk of conflict.

## KEY ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING REASSURANCE:

- **Conflict is rooted in miscalculation:** Wars and military conflicts often result from miscalculations, misunderstandings, or the dynamics of the security dilemma, where one state's defensive actions are perceived as offensive by another.
- **Security as the priority for states:** Most states prioritize their security above all else in the international system, making reassurance strategies effective if they convincingly reduce perceived threats.

By addressing misperceptions and mitigating security dilemmas, reassurance serves as a vital tool for conflict management, particularly in the high-stakes relationship between the United States and China.

## Why reassurance?

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The United States and China currently rely heavily on military deterrence to prevent war – an approach that is both alarming and precarious. While the United States has strengthened its security partnerships with Indo-Pacific allies and partners, China has rapidly expanded its military capabilities. Recent examples include China's reported successful test of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in the Pacific Ocean, the test flights of two new stealth fighters, and the launch of the world's first electromagnetic catapult-equipped amphibious assault ship. Similarly, in February 2025, the United States conducted a test launch of an unarmed Minuteman III ICBM to ensure the continued safety and effectiveness of its land-based nuclear force.

From a realist perspective, both the United States and China are acting rationally by bolstering their deterrence capabilities to prepare for worst-case scenarios in their strategic competition. Deterrence, as a well-established conflict management strategy, aims to prevent aggression by demonstrating defensive capability or threatening credible retaliation.

However, empirical evidence suggests that deterrence alone often fails to prevent conflict between security-seeking states. Overreliance on deterrence risks escalating a classic security dilemma, where each side interprets the other's defensive measures as offensive or aggressive (Herz 1950; Jervis 1978). This cycle of mutual suspicion and countermeasures fuels tensions, heightening the risk of miscalculation, crisis, or even war.

In the nuclear age, the stakes are extraordinarily high. A military conflict between two nuclear-armed powers like the United States and China would be catastrophic, with consequences too grave to contemplate. Against this backdrop, reassurance emerges as a vital strategy to reduce the risk of miscalculation and address the underlying dynamics of the security dilemma.

Reassurance does not seek to replace deterrence but rather to complement it. While deterrence relies on the threat of punishment to prevent aggression, reassurance aims to alleviate adversaries' suspicions and build confidence by signalling peaceful intentions. Together, these strategies provide a more balanced and effective approach to managing strategic competition, particularly in the high-stakes relationship between the United States and China.

## How to reassure adversaries in theory

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Theoretical approaches to reassurance suggest several strategies that states can use to reduce tensions and build confidence with their adversaries (Jervis 1979, Stein 1991; Kydd 2000; Lebow 2001; Montgomery 2006; Steinberg and O'Hanlon 2014 and 2015; Zhang and Lebow 2020):

### 1. Irrevocable Commitments

Leaders can make bold, irrevocable commitments to demonstrate benign intentions and reduce mistrust. Historical examples include Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's groundbreaking visit to Israel in 1977, which paved the way for peace talks, and Mikhail Gorbachev's public commitment to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1988, signalling a genuine desire for de-escalation.

### 2. Strategic Restraints (Unilateral and Mutual)

States can impose unilateral restraints to signal peaceful intent or engage in mutual restraints to de-escalate tensions. For example, during the 1987 crisis, India and Pakistan mutually restrained their military actions, easing bilateral tensions for several months. These measures demonstrate a commitment to avoiding actions that could provoke conflict.

### 3. Informal or Formal Norms of Competition

States can collaborate to establish informal norms that regulate competition and minimize the risk of miscalculation. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union developed tacit understandings about limiting their competition in the Middle East, helping to prevent their allies from taking military actions that could provoke superpower intervention and escalate regional conflicts.

A more formal example is found in the management of border disputes between China and India. Their 1996 “Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the China-India Border Areas” explicitly states that neither side shall open fire within two kilometres of the Line of Actual Control (LAC).[2] This norm has played a crucial role in preventing military escalation, even during recent clashes in disputed border areas such as the Galwan Valley in 2020.

### 4. Formal or Informal Regimes

Establishing formal or informal regimes can help build confidence and reduce uncertainty between adversaries. For instance, the United States and the Soviet Union created a series of confidence-building measures, including SALT I, SALT II, START I, START II, New START, the Open Skies Treaty, and the US–Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement. These regimes institutionalized trust-building measures and reduced risks of unintended escalation.

Each of these strategies provides valuable insights into how states can effectively reassure their adversaries, helping to reduce tensions and promote stability in high-stakes relationships. They offer a framework for understanding how the United States and China can implement reassurance measures toward one another.

## How to reassure adversaries in practice

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### What to reassure

The intensifying US–China strategic competition is most pronounced in four regional hotspots, each with the potential to escalate into military conflict or war. These critical areas are:

- Taiwan
- The Korean Peninsula
- The South China Sea
- The East China Sea

Beyond these regional flashpoints, several strategic domains pose significant risks of destabilizing arms races, escalating crises, and potentially leading to conflict. These core strategic areas include:

- Nuclear weapons
- Conventional military capabilities
- Space security
- Cybersecurity
- Maritime security

These hotspots and strategic domains illustrate the potential triggers for conflict between the United States and China. Expanding or refining this list to include additional domains or regions may provide a more comprehensive view of the potential risks.

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[2] See “Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas,” New Delhi, November 29, 1996, Article VI. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/CH96B1124.pdf> .

# Policy recommendations

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Drawing on insights from reassurance theories, we propose a four-step reassurance approach to build confidence, reduce tensions, and foster stability between the United States and China. It is important to emphasize that implementing reassurance measures between two potential adversaries amidst intense strategic competition is highly challenging. If not managed effectively, reassurance can easily be perceived as a sign of weakness by the rival party or as appeasement by domestic audiences. As a result, policymakers in the United States and China are likely to be exceptionally cautious about pursuing reassurance policies, whether initiated by themselves or by the opposing party.

To address these challenges, we recommend adopting the following three principles when implementing reassurance strategies:

- **From Words to Deeds:** Moving beyond verbal assurances to tangible actions that demonstrate credible and consistent intent.
- **Reciprocity Between the Two Sides:** Responding to tangible reassurance measures by an adversary by tangible measures of one's own, as a means to ensure mutuality.
- **Gradualism from Behaviour to Norm:** Progressing incrementally from specific behaviours to the establishment of shared norms and institutions over time.

Our four-step reassurance approach below is designed to reflect these principles, aiming to reduce miscalculation, decrease tensions, and promote stability amidst the ongoing US–China strategic competition. We acknowledge that reassurance plays a complementary role in enhancing effective deterrence between the two countries. However, without credible reassurance, reliance on deterrence alone could increase the risk of military conflict or war between the United States and China.

## STEP 1: MAKING CREDIBLE COMMITMENTS TO DEMONSTRATE LONG-TERM INTENTIONS

The first step emphasizes the importance of making credible commitments to reduce misunderstandings and miscalculations between the United States and China. This involves using “words” or public commitments to signal benign intentions, which represent relatively low-risk actions for leaders in both countries. To ensure credibility, these commitments should be unequivocal and transparent, clearly demonstrating peaceful intentions toward the other party.

While some of these commitments have been made by leaders in both countries on various occasions, public reaffirmation of these commitments would further reduce uncertainties, minimize risks of miscalculation, and help prevent military conflict. This would create a stable foundation for managing their strategic competition.

### Recommendations for the United States

- **Publicly Repudiate Regime Change Intentions:** Explicitly distancing itself from strategies aimed at undermining the Chinese government would signal a commitment to coexistence and mutual respect, reducing Beijing's worries of encirclement and hostility.
- **Publicly Reaffirm the “One China” Policy:** A clear, public commitment to maintaining the current US policy on Taiwan would alleviate Beijing's concerns and ensure stability across the Taiwan Strait.
- **Publicly State “No Containment” Against China:** Making an unequivocal statement that the United States does not intend to wage a new Cold War against China would help de-escalate tensions. Instead, the US could emphasize its commitment to addressing economic, technological, and strategic competition with China through peaceful and constructive means.

## Recommendations for China

- **Publicly Affirm Commitment to the Current International Order:** China should explicitly state that it does not seek to overturn the existing international order instead recognizing the United States' crucial role in maintaining global stability. Additionally, China could express its commitment to cooperating with the United States on global challenges, including climate change, cybersecurity, military use of AI, and pandemic threats.
- **Publicly Reiterate a Peaceful Approach to Taiwan Reunification:** By reaffirming that there is no fixed timetable or deadline for resolving the Taiwan issue and emphasizing a peaceful approach, China would reinforce its benign intentions and alleviate fears of an abrupt conflict in the Taiwan Strait that could escalate and destabilize the entire region.
- **Publicly Commit to Proactive Cooperation on Countering Drug Trafficking:** Pledging continued and proactive collaboration with the United States to combat the flow of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids would demonstrate China's commitment to addressing mutual security concerns.

By adhering to these publicly pledged commitments, both countries would send powerful signals of restraint and stability to each other and the international community. Ideally, the United States and China could formalize some of these commitments by signing a fifth joint communique. However, if domestic political considerations make this impractical, public statements by leaders in both countries could still help reduce uncertainties and miscalculations.

These commitments would set the stage for further confidence-building measures and cooperative initiatives, paving the way for a more stable and constructive strategic relationship.

## STEP 2: IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC RESTRAINTS: RECIPROCAL BEHAVIOUR TO ENHANCE COMMITMENTS

The second step of reassurance involves moving from words to deeds by implementing strategic restraints to reduce tensions between the United States and China. These measures serve as confidence-building mechanisms, signalling a commitment to stability and coexistence. Both countries can initiate unilateral actions with the expectation of reciprocal behaviour from the other side, fostering a cycle of mutual restraint and reducing the risk of escalation.

### Recommendations for the United States

- **Restrict Certain Military Developments:** Limiting the deployment of advanced weapon systems that can be taken by China as threats in the region would demonstrate goodwill and reduce perceived threats to China.
- **Exercise Caution in Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs):** Pre-announcing and reducing the intensity and frequency of FONOPs in the South China Sea—while avoiding close proximity to natural and artificial islands and rocks occupied by China, which it considers its own territories—would uphold US positions on freedom of navigation while helping to de-escalate tensions.
- **Limit Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Activities:** Reducing high-intensity close-in ISR operations near sensitive regions would alleviate perceptions of provocation and build trust.
- **Refrain from Undermining the “One China” Policy:** Avoiding high-profile arms sales to Taiwan or political visits by senior US officials would ensure consistency in US commitments and help reduce tensions.
- **Avoid Targeting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Official Statements:** Recognizing that regime security is central to China's core interests, refraining from official denouncement of the CCP would reduce suspicions about US intentions.



## Recommendations for China

- **Avoid Excessive Military Exercises:** Avoiding or reducing unnotified large-scale military drills around Taiwan or in contested parts of the South China Sea would decrease regional anxieties and encourage reciprocal actions from the United States. Additionally, measured and proportional responses to perceived provocations, such as high-profile US visits to Taiwan, would help maintain stability.
- **Keep Safe Distance:** Keeping a safe distance from US naval ships or aircraft involved in FONOPs and ISRs would reduce tensions.
- **Regularize Military Communication:** Enhancing existing military communication channels, particularly during crises, would minimize misunderstandings and escalation risks. This approach builds on lessons learned from past incidents, such as the 2001 EP-3 collision, which underscored the importance of communication.
- **Limit Reliance on “Gray Zone Tactics”:** Refraining from quasi-military actions, such as maritime militia operations, would enhance confidence and stability in disputed waters. Avoiding coercive actions against other claimant states in the South China Sea would further reduce strategic tensions with the United States.
- **Upgrade Negotiations with ASEAN on a Legally Binding Code of Conduct (COC):** Prioritizing the conclusion of a legally binding COC with ASEAN would significantly reduce maritime tensions in the South China Sea, especially between China and the United States. Emphasizing conflict prevention would further enhance stability.

These strategic restraint actions can be initiated and implemented unilaterally by either country. However, the effectiveness of reassurance depends on appropriate reciprocal actions from the other side. If one party perceives a lack of reciprocity, it may feel betrayed or disadvantaged, undermining confidence and increasing the risk of escalation.

Therefore, it is essential for both countries to engage in reciprocal restraints to reassure each other of their benign intentions. This process is likely to be ongoing and may face setbacks, but demonstrating concrete strategic restraints is crucial. By fostering a cycle of mutual restraint, both countries can pave the way for developing norms and regimes of reassurance, ultimately contributing to greater stability and security.

## STEP 3: CULTIVATING NORMS OF COMPETITION

The third step of reassurance involves cultivating norms of competition, which require sustained negotiation and cooperation between the United States and China. Building these norms is a long-term process that necessitates fundamental understanding and practical cooperation to initiate meaningful negotiations. Establishing norms of competition is essential for enhancing predictability, reducing tensions, and maintaining strategic stability.

### Recommendations for both the United States and China

- **Tacit Agreements to Limit Military Activities:** Negotiating informal agreements to restrict military activities in contentious areas, such as the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait, would help reduce military tensions. For instance, the United States and China could agree to simultaneously reduce US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and China’s grey zone activities to avoid confrontation in the South China Sea.
- **Expand Adherence to the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES):** Encouraging the serious and broader implementation of non-binding CUES would enhance maritime safety and reduce risks during interactions between naval ships, maritime surveillance vessels, coast guard ships, and fishing boats, particularly in crowded or contested waters. This approach would help prevent accidents and misunderstandings that could escalate tensions.
- **Cyber Norms for Critical Systems:** Establishing tacit agreements to refrain from targeting critical military command-and-control systems and crucial infrastructure would safeguard essential infrastructure and reduce the risks of destabilizing cyberattacks. This measure would contribute to the stability of both countries’ digital ecosystems and prevent unintended escalation.

These informal and formal norms would not only mitigate bilateral tensions but also encourage responsible behaviour in broader international contexts, benefiting regional actors and strengthening global governance.

## STEP 4: ESTABLISHING REGIMES TO BUILD LONG-TERM CONFIDENCE

The fourth step of reassurance involves creating formal and informal regimes to strengthen confidence and reduce tensions between the United States and China. Unlike norm-building, establishing regimes requires official agreements or institutional frameworks that provide structured channels for dialogue, crisis management, and cooperation. These regimes enhance predictability and stability in bilateral interactions. The establishment of such regimes necessitates sustained negotiations and cooperation between the two countries.

### Recommendations for both the United States and China

- **Establish High-Level Crisis Communication Mechanisms:** This would include exchanges of visits by leaders and regular high-level talks to increase mutual understanding and avoid miscalculations. Additionally, they should make the best use of international conferences to maximize opportunities for dialogue.
- **Assign Special Envoys for Key Bilateral Issues:** Appointing special envoys for critical bilateral issues—such as trade or regional stability—would revitalize diplomatic ties. These envoys would act as focal points for sustained dialogue, ensuring open communication channels even during periods of heightened tension.
- **Negotiate Bilateral Frameworks for Strategic Stability:** Developing bilateral agreements or treaties on nuclear non-proliferation, arms control, or other strategic stability issues would signal mutual restraint. For instance, a bilateral arms control framework could address concerns about emerging technologies, such as hypersonic missiles or AI-enabled weapon systems. Regular talks on arms control should be encouraged.
- **Institutionalized Communication Channels:** Enhancing and institutionalizing crisis communication mechanisms at multiple levels, including military-to-military channels, would improve the capacity for real-time conflict management. Existing hotlines between state leaders and military leaders should be utilized more frequently. Additionally, communications between theatre commanders should be conducted on a regular basis.
- **Establish Security Regimes for Emerging Technologies:** Initiating negotiations on binding rules and institutions for AI, cyberwarfare, and outer space technologies would prevent these areas from becoming destabilizing arenas of competition. Agreements could include bans on autonomous lethal weapons or prohibitions on the militarization of space.
- **Build a Multilateral Security Council for the Western Pacific:** Advocating for the creation of a multilateral security council focused on the Western Pacific would institutionalize dialogue and reduce the likelihood of conflict. This council would provide a dedicated forum for managing regional disputes and fostering cooperation among key players in the Western Pacific, complementing existing mechanisms like the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).
- **Initiate Negotiations on the Safety of Underwater Cables in the South China Sea and Beyond:** The United States and China could take a joint initiative with ASEAN to negotiate a Declaration on the Safety of Underwater Cables in the South China Sea and beyond. Ensuring the freedom to lay cables in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of other countries is guaranteed by UNCLOS. As regional reliance on oil and gas pipelines, electric cables, and digital communication cables grows, these infrastructures need protection against sabotage, as evidenced by incidents in the Baltic Sea. The United States and China could lead efforts to investigate accidental or deliberate cable-cutting, contributing to the security of critical infrastructure.

By forming these formal and informal regimes, the United States and China can institutionalize efforts to manage competition responsibly, ensuring that their rivalry remains stable and predictable. These institutional frameworks would also encourage broader international cooperation and contribute to regional and global security.

# Starting Points and Challenges Ahead

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The success of reassurance efforts between the United States and China depends on the political will, strategic vision, and actionable commitments of their leaders. The proposed four-step reassurance approach offers a gradualist pathway to build confidence, reduce miscalculations, and enhance predictability amidst intense strategic competition. While reassurance measures will not eliminate competition between the two powers, they can encourage responsible and peaceful competition while reducing the risk of unintended military conflicts.

To create a conducive environment for reassurance, the United States and China should consider the following five starting points:

## FIVE STARTING POINTS FOR BOTH THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

- **Elevate High-Level Diplomacy:** Both countries should prioritize and institutionalize summit diplomacy between their leaders, ensuring regular and structured engagement. Appointing special envoys dedicated to implementing reassurance measures would enhance diplomatic continuity and maintain open communication channels, even during periods of tension.
- **Resume Strategic and Economic Dialogues:** Reviving the strategic and economic dialogues established during the Obama administration or creating new, targeted high-level communication channels focused on how to overcome or prevent trade wars would enhance mutual confidence. These mechanisms would also help prevent misunderstandings and miscalculations, facilitating strategic stability.
- **Institutionalize Regular Military Consultations:** Ensure regular meetings between the PLA and the US Indo-Pacific Command. Invite US observers to Chinese military exercises and vice versa. Both governments should pledge not to interrupt their consultations in times of crisis.
- **Enhance Information Sharing:** The United States could share updates on military, economic, medical and technological developments, while China could increase transparency regarding its intentions in contentious areas. The institutionalized military-to-military dialogues would provide a structured platform for information sharing, reducing uncertainties and fostering greater transparency.
- **Create Joint Working Groups to Address Sensitive Issues:** Establishing joint working groups would facilitate high-level diplomatic dialogue on sensitive issues. For instance, the United States and China could identify sensitive targets deemed off-limits for cyberattacks or ensure human oversight of AI-enabled military systems. These cooperative mechanisms would enhance mutual confidence and reduce the risk of strategic miscalculation.

By pursuing these five starting points, the United States and China can lay the groundwork for effective reassurance, contributing to a more stable and predictable strategic relationship.

## CHALLENGES AHEAD

Despite the potential benefits of reassurance strategies, several significant challenges must be addressed to ensure successful implementation between the United States and China:

### 1. Escalation Before Stabilization

The strategic competition between the United States and China is likely to intensify before either side fully recognizes the necessity of reassurance. As this rivalry deepens, both sides may increasingly test each other's red lines, heightening the risk of miscalculation. It is crucial for decision-makers in both countries to fully acknowledge the indispensable role of reassurance in maintaining regional stability and preventing conflict.

As the dominant power in this competition, the United States currently holds the upper hand, but this also entails a greater responsibility to shape the rivalry in a constructive and stable manner. Washington should consider leading by example to ensure that competition remains managed and does not escalate into open conflict. Meanwhile, China, as the rising power, should also explore strategic restraint—particularly in Taiwan and the South China Sea—to help mitigate bilateral tensions and foster a more stable U.S.–China relationship.

### 2. Domestic Constraints

Domestic political and social factors in both the United States and China pose significant challenges to implementing reassurance strategies. Public opinion, political pressures, and institutional inertia can limit the willingness and flexibility of leaders to pursue policies that might be perceived as conciliatory or weak. In the United States, bipartisan rivalry and public scepticism toward China may hinder policy shifts, while in China, nationalism and concerns over regime security can limit strategic flexibility. These internal dynamics complicate efforts to prioritize long-term stability over short-term gains in strategic competition.

### 3. Leaders' Risk-Taking Behaviours

The potential for risk-taking behaviours by leaders in both nations, driven by domestic political considerations, significantly increases the likelihood of miscalculations or unintended escalation. Trade war, provocative military manoeuvres, confrontational rhetoric, and unilateral actions in contested areas—particularly regarding Taiwan—intensify tensions and erode the potential for dialogue. Such actions represent a dangerous gamble that undermines mutual trust and heightens the risk of crises with potentially catastrophic consequences.

However, another perspective is that both President Trump and President Xi are strong leaders capable of making bold decisions. A grand bargain between the United States and China could provide a new, peaceful framework for managing strategic competition in the 21st century. The viability of such an approach depends largely on constructive and sustained diplomatic engagement between the two countries' top leaders. In this context, reassurance could serve as a crucial starting point for fostering diplomatic dialogue.

In conclusion, by acknowledging these challenges, policymakers in the United States and China can develop strategic approaches to mitigate risks and enhance the effectiveness of reassurance measures. However, overcoming these challenges requires political will, strategic vision, and diplomatic wisdom from both sides. Only by confronting these obstacles can the two countries navigate their strategic competition responsibly and maintain global stability.



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