The Threat that Leaves Something to Chance in U.S.-China Relations

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* The views expressed do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.
Changing Strategic Balance

*China is developing…*

- more secure & credible second strike
- sophisticated conventional forces for anti-access/area denial strategy

*Deterrance Concern is that…*

- conventional conflict too costly for United States
- but U.S. nuclear threats not credible
U.S. Response: Conventional Deterrence by Denial

• deny china the benefits of anti-access/area denial strategy

• use conventional forces to deny benefits

• greater reliance on nuclear weapons not credible
The Threat that Leaves Something to Chance

• fear of escalation to nuclear war should contribute to deterrence even when nuclear threats aren’t credible

• both countries uncertain of each other’s intentions & capabilities

• miscalculation, misperception, & miscommunication create risk of inadvertent escalation
The Threat that Leaves Something to Chance

- escalation is “an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses thresholds considered significant by one or more of the participants” – Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century, Rand Project Air Force

- thresholds are subjective

- actors might be unaware of each other’s thresholds or interpret the same threshold differently
Applying the Threat that Leaves Something to Chance

• U.S. couldn’t credibly threaten to start a nuclear war with the Soviet Union
• but U.S. could credibly threaten to stumble into one (e.g., stationing U.S. forces in Europe)
• the chance of escalation to nuclear war would deter Soviet Union
• China’s lack of transparency & strategic posture heighten risks of inadvertent escalation
Counter-Space & Cyber Forces

• satellites & computer networks important for command & control, communication, ISR, navigation, & precision targeting

• unlikely China would understand U.S. thresholds

• escalation risks of counter-space & cyber weapons could exceed actual capabilities
Dual-Mission Delivery Vehicles

• missiles of the same model, but some carry conventional warheads & some carry nuclear warheads

• may be co-located in same base or storage facility & share command & control facilities

• U.S. attacks a conventional target, but China perceives it as an attack on nuclear forces
Nuclear Signaling

- PLA writings emphasize counter-deterrence

- posture nuclear forces to signal resolve & capability

- U.S. & China could perceive same threshold, but interpret the implications differently
What are the Implications?

- risks of inadvertent escalation will only influence China if Chinese leaders perceive them as risks

- transparency & predictability to reduce risks

- U.S. not credible if it identifies a problem and does nothing to solve it
This could strengthen deterrence if...

- U.S. convinces China that concerns are genuine & valid

- China becomes more cautious, less confident in ability to control crises & conflicts