

## ***Chapter 3***

# **Deterrence and Arms Control**

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The Korean War began on June 25, 1950 with a North Korean surprise attack that almost succeeded in destroying South Korea. Under U.S. leadership, the United Nations intervened, with considerable effect. By late September, North Korean forces were in full retreat and UN forces were approaching the 38th parallel, the de facto border between North and South Korea.

Within Washington, there was little concern that crossing the parallel would induce China to enter the war. As the administration of President Harry Truman saw it, the crossing was not an escalation but a continuation of war on its existing terms—a necessary step to restore “international peace and security in the area,” the mandate given by the United Nations. Moreover, the United States did not view the 38th parallel as a significant political boundary.<sup>1</sup> It was, in the words of the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, an “imaginary line.”<sup>2</sup> At his urging, the General Assembly supported its crossing, which South Korean troops did on October 1.

For China, the 38th parallel was anything but imaginary. The Chinese Communist Party was consolidating power and afraid that, without North Korea as a buffer zone, the United States might attack China. Accordingly, it viewed the crossing as a significant escalation of the conflict. Over the course of two weeks of agonized debate at the start of October, China decided to intervene. The war lasted another three years and saw millions of deaths.

In my view, the crossing of the 38th parallel is the paradigm example of unintended escalation. To be clear, I am not claiming that the crossing was unintended. The UN commander, General Douglas MacArthur, did not misread the map and send his forces across what he thought was the 37th parallel. Rather, what was unintended was the escalation. Washington honestly did not believe that crossing into North Korea

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 83 (June 27, 1950), <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/83>.

<sup>2</sup> Warren R. Austin, “Peace and Security for the Future of Korea” in U.S. Department of State, *Bulletin* XXIII, no. 588 (October 9, 1950), 579.

represented an escalation. China disagreed, and its opinion was the one that determined whether it intervened.

Almost three quarters of a century later, the United States and Japan are again contemplating the possibility of a conflict against China. Only today, China has nuclear weapons. In consequence, the Korean War, as horrific as it was, could pale into insignificance next to a possible future conflict against China. In this context, a useful and plausible role for arms control is to reinforce deterrence and reduce the likelihood of unintended escalation's leading to a nuclear war.

Reducing the likelihood of a nuclear war does not mean eliminating it as a possibility. Even if arms control could succeed perfectly and entirely prevent unintended escalation—which it could not—deliberate escalation would still be possible. In particular, the state that was losing a potential U.S.-Chinese war might resort to the use of nuclear weapons in a desperate attempt to stave off a catastrophic conventional defeat. Even so, given the potential consequences of a nuclear war—which the Japanese people know better than anyone—reducing the likelihood of such a war seems like a useful endeavor.

Unfortunately, I am not optimistic. Given the prevailing politics, it is unlikely that the United States and China will succeed in negotiating any arms control agreements, at least in the short term. That said, I believe the effort to try and make progress on arms control is worthwhile—the costs are essentially zero and the potential benefits significant.

## **What is arms control?**

The term “arms control with China” typically conjures up the image of legally binding numerical limits on China’s nuclear forces. The administration of President Donald Trump endorsed this goal in supporting a trilateral (U.S.-Chinese-Russian) arms limitation agreement.<sup>3</sup> The attraction of this concept is clear enough; it would clearly serve the interests of the United States and its allies. Whether it would serve Chinese interests is more questionable. Certainly, Beijing does not believe it would, and China gets to determine its own interests. Few American officials and analysts have even tried to persuade it otherwise. To their credit, some in the Trump administration did try. However, their argument—that China would “be seen as a great power... [by] sitting down with the United States and Russia,...the first-tier forces, to negotiate”—did not

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<sup>3</sup> “Trump Calls for Arms Control with Russia and China in Putin Call,” Reuters, May 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN22J2JV/>.

appear to gain any traction in Beijing.<sup>4</sup>

In identifying arms control proposals that both Washington *and* Beijing might judge to be beneficial, we should move back toward the broad, original definition, advanced by Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin: “all the forms of military cooperation between potential adversaries.”<sup>5</sup> In this view, arms control includes legally binding and politically binding measures to improve communications, enhance transparency, build confidence, and regulate behavior (as well as to limit force size).

### What is unintended escalation?

Reducing unintended escalation risks is perhaps the most promising—or, rather, the least unpromising—goal for arms control. Having already provided one example of unintended escalation, here is a definition.

Successfully managing escalation requires the participants in a crisis or war to establish limits. These limits might be geographical features (like rivers), political boundaries (like borders), or the use of a particular type of weapon (like nuclear weapons). Sometimes a state decides that escalation serves its interests, even absent any expectation that its adversary is planning to escalate, and crosses an adversary’s redline, fully aware that it is doing so. Such escalation is deliberate. Vladimir Putin’s misbegotten invasion of Ukraine clearly falls into this category.

At other times, both belligerents can assess that a set of mutually observed limits would serve their interests, yet they can fail to establish such limits despite good-faith efforts to do so. Escalation in this case is unintended. The crossing of the 38th parallel fits this description. The United States did not understand that the parallel was a Chinese redline. Had it understood that crossing that redline would induce China to enter the war, it would not have done so—as key contemporary documents indicate.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Transcript of “Special Presidential Envoy Marshall Billingslea on the Future of Nuclear Arms Control,” Hudson Institute, Washington, DC, May 21, 2020, 10, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Transcript\\_Marshall%20Billingslea%20on%20the%20Future%20of%20Nuclear%20Arms%20Control.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Transcript_Marshall%20Billingslea%20on%20the%20Future%20of%20Nuclear%20Arms%20Control.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), 2.

<sup>6</sup> “United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea,” Report by the National Security Council to the President, NSC 81/1, September 9, 1950 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, vol. VII, *Korea*, Document 505, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v07/d505>.

## The importance of demarcating redlines

Efforts to prevent unintended escalation and to bolster deterrence are sometimes mutually reinforcing. Specifically, for an adversary to be deterred from crossing one of our redlines, it must know where that redline is. Demarcating our redlines (though not without costs) can prevent an adversary from stumbling across them unintentionally. In the process, we can threaten consequences for a deliberate crossing.

Let me give a practical example of where demarcating redlines could be useful. It might not be clear to China that, in a conventional war, it would cross a U.S. redline by launching nonnuclear attacks against dual-use command-and-control assets (that is, command-and-control assets that enable both nuclear and nonnuclear operations). It is partly for this reason that, in the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, the United States threatened that it might use nuclear weapons in the event of nonnuclear attacks against its nuclear command-and-control assets.<sup>7</sup> While I believe it was a mistake to threaten nuclear use in this circumstance, the idea of emphasizing the importance of such assets was exactly right. I believe the administration of President Joe Biden erred by not doing so in its Nuclear Posture Review.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, states make declaratory policy unilaterally. However, cooperative measures can also be used to reinforce redlines and reduce the likelihood of unintended escalation.

## Safety zones

I am particularly concerned about the possibility of unintended escalation's resulting from space activities in high-altitude orbits (geosynchronous and Molniya, to be technically precise). China, Russia, and the United States all use these orbits for nuclear command and control, among other purposes.

The biggest threat to satellites in high-altitude orbits comes from space-based co-orbital weapons, essentially other satellites. Such a weapon could approach an enemy satellite and then attack it (perhaps by ramming into it, perhaps by a more sophisticated method). In a conventional conflict, even nuclear command-and-control satellites might not be immune to attack because many, if not all, are dual-use.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review," February 2018, 21, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

<sup>8</sup> "2022 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review" in U.S. Department of Defense, "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

It is also possible that one state might *wrongly* believe its satellites were under attack, or at least wrongly assess that they might be. Satellites are often repositioned for non-hostile reasons. During a repositioning operation, one satellite might approach another. In a crisis or conflict, this kind of maneuver could be misinterpreted as the prelude to an attack. Or, to put it in more theoretical terms, the owner of the satellite that was apparently being targeted might wrongly believe that its adversary was about to cross one of its redlines. In response, it might try to foil the attack—by, for example, attacking its adversary’s capabilities for communicating with its satellites—potentially escalating the conflict unintentionally.

Arms control could help to reduce this danger. Specifically, China, Russia, and the United States could agree to establish “safety zones” around one another’s satellites in high-altitude orbits.<sup>9</sup> In other words, each could commit not to maneuver any of its satellites to within an agreed distance of satellites in high-altitude orbits belonging to the other participants.

Two colleagues and I have developed this proposal in more detail. I will not belabor the details here, except to say that, in practice, sometimes one satellite must pass close to another during a non-hostile repositioning operation. We would, therefore, permit one state to move one of its satellites through the safety zone of another state’s satellite so long as it provided 24 hours’ advanced notice and conducted only one such maneuver at a time.

During a crisis or conflict, states would have every incentive to abide by a safety-zone agreement if they were not planning an attack. Of course, if a state believed its interests were best served by attacking an adversary’s satellites, the existence of an agreement would probably not stop it from doing so. Nonetheless, the agreement would still be valuable for two reasons.

First, states—and here I really mean the United States—could use negotiations as an opportunity to impress upon China and Russia the serious potential consequences of attacking U.S. satellites. This kind of messaging could help deter such attacks. Second, it would take an attacker some time to move a co-orbital anti-satellite weapon from the edge of a safety zone to the satellites at its center. In fact, depending on the size of the safety zone, this process could take a few hours. The owner of the target satellite could

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<sup>9</sup> James M. Acton, Thomas D. MacDonald, and Pranay Vaddi, *Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control: A Comprehensive Approach* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), 61–69, [https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Acton\\_et\\_al\\_ReImagining\\_Arms\\_Control\\_fnl\\_1.pdf](https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Acton_et_al_ReImagining_Arms_Control_fnl_1.pdf).

use this time to try to defeat the attack, by ordering its satellite to undertake evasive maneuvers, for example. Thus, a safety zone agreement demonstrates how arms control designed to reduce the risk of unintended escalation could also bolster deterrence of deliberate escalation.

## Launch notifications

A second measure to reduce the risk of unintended escalation would be a launch notification agreement.<sup>10</sup> Under such an agreement, participants would provide pre-launch notifications (and ideally also post-notifications) of space launches and test launches of ballistic missiles, boost-glide missiles, missile defense interceptors, and target missiles (subject to various defined criteria).

The goal here would be to prevent a space or test launch from being mistaken for an attack, or the preparations for such a launch being mistaken as the preparations for an attack. This danger is not hypothetical. In January 1995, Russian early-warning personnel mistook a sounding rocket launched from the Norwegian coast for a Trident D5 sea-launched ballistic missile. President Boris Yeltsin activated his cheget, or “nuclear briefcase,” before it became clear that there was no danger. In peacetime, the likelihood that this kind of incident could spark escalation is very low. In a crisis or conflict, it could be a different story.

There are various launch notification agreements in operation today: U.S.-Russian, Russian-Chinese, and Indian-Pakistani arrangements as well as the Hague Code of Conduct. However, this patchwork of arrangements has many flaws and holes, including the absence of any U.S.-Chinese notifications.

In 2023, the U.S. National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, publicly endorsed a missile launch notification regime among the P5—an idea I wholeheartedly support.<sup>11</sup> In parallel, I believe the space-faring states of East Asia—including, of course, Japan and China—should negotiate a regional arrangement.

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<sup>10</sup> Acton, MacDonald, and Vaddi, *Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control*, 53–59.

<sup>11</sup> Jake Sullivan, remarks at Arms Control Association Annual Forum, Washington, DC, June 2, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/02/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-for-the-arms-control-association-aca-annual-forum/>.

### Is any of this feasible?

These two measures—safety zones and launch notifications—would be simultaneously modest in their effects and politically challenging to negotiate. They would not, by themselves, dramatically reduce the overall danger of escalation—though, if implemented successfully, they could provide a springboard for further, farther-reaching cooperation.

That said, the prospects for U.S.-Chinese arms control are unquestionably poor. The United States expresses interest in such arms control. However, there is no chance that the Senate would ratify any treaty that might plausibly be negotiated. Even nonbinding agreements would doubtless encounter significant domestic opposition, including from within the United States government and perhaps also from allies.

China, meanwhile, does not hide its lack of interest in arms control. Some of the resistance is surely internal, stemming from bureaucratic and regime politics. Additionally, China would doubtless have strategic concerns about any proposed agreement. But, for current purposes, the biggest question is whether China is actually interested in reducing the likelihood of unintended escalation.

There is reason for skepticism. Beijing is notorious for refusing to use its hotline with Washington. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has indicated a desire to negotiate bilateral “guardrails” with China to try to prevent a war. Chinese officials have reportedly likened such guardrails to “giving a speeding driver a seatbelt.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Beijing may want to use the risk of a crash to deter the United States from driving recklessly, that is, from taking actions, such as close-in surveillance flights, that China opposes. Indeed, on occasion, the United States has also adopted this strategy, often termed “the threat that leaves something to chance.”<sup>13</sup>

Such thinking could stymie efforts to reduce the danger of unintended escalation, at least in the short term—though the only way to find out is to make specific proposals to Beijing and accompany them with an offer to negotiate. One reason for not being completely pessimistic is that, even if Beijing seeks to manipulate unintended escalation risks for deterrent or compellent purposes, it is unclear whether this strategy includes space operations or missile tests specifically.

Over the long term, though, there is some reason to expect that Beijing and Washington may find a common interest in mitigating unintended escalation risks. Assuming their current standoff is prolonged—as seems likely—there will probably be

<sup>12</sup> Gideon Rachman, “How to Stop a War Between America and China,” *Financial Times*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/44fb5a00-e7b8-48bf-be20-5f72b2d4a048>.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1960), 187–203.

crises that underscore the dangers of war. Such crises can motivate cooperative actions to mitigate risks, just as the Cuban Missile Crisis did for the United States and the Soviet Union 61 years ago.

Of course, it would be better if China and the United States cooperated on risk reduction now, before any crisis. After all, if a crisis goes badly, we will have bigger challenges afterwards than negotiating a risk-reduction agreement. But even in the absence of cooperation in the short-term, Beijing and Washington can and should start preparing today for future arms control opportunities.