

The Penn Project on  
**THE FUTURE OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS**

---

**NATIONAL SECURITY:  
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

*The Penn Project on the Future of U.S.-China Relations presents the following findings and recommendations from its National Security group. The [policy papers](#) on which they are based, a [video](#) of the September 25<sup>th</sup> webinar featuring these authors, and additional information can be found on the Project [website](#).*

---

**“Nationalism and the Domestic Politics of Chinese Foreign Policy”**

Jessica Chen Weiss, Cornell University

Findings:

1. In the short term, Chinese nationalism is a source of state legitimacy, which poses risks and challenges for U.S. deterrence because it increases the cost of Chinese conciliation and therefore the probability of confrontation.
2. In the long term, Chinese nationalism will hinder Beijing’s bid for global leadership and influence as other countries grow wary of its triumphalism and aggressive foreign policy.
3. China is not a monolith. International pressure can be effective when it aligns with the domestic divisions reflected in Beijing’s rhetoric and actions.

Recommendations:

1. Washington should adopt an asymmetric strategy that avoids mirror-imaging Beijing’s worst tendencies; this will reduce the risk of war with China, reverse the decline in U.S. global power and prestige, and restore trust in U.S. democracy.
2. U.S. policymakers should more carefully calculate when international pressure on Beijing is likely to succeed or backfire by attending to variety in the domestic divisions within China across different issues.
3. Washington should be especially careful not to imply that U.S. policy seeks regime change in China, which could backfire by rallying domestic audiences around Xi Jinping’s leadership rather than demanding that his government address acute domestic problems, like unemployment, inequality, and pollution.

The Penn Project on  
**THE FUTURE OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS**

---

**“Lessons from the Trump Administration’s Policy Experiment on China”**  
Ryan Hass, Brookings Institution, McLarty Associates, and The Scowcroft Group

Findings:

1. The Trump administration has embarked on arguably the boldest American policy experiment on China since the establishment of diplomatic relations over 40 years ago.
2. The Trump administration’s policy experiment on China sought to slow China’s national progress and pressure China’s leaders to become more responsive to American priorities and concerns; thus far, the results of this policy experiment have not achieved their aspirations.
3. During the Trump administration, China has grown less restrained in pursuit of its ambitions and less attentive to American concerns, confrontation has intensified, cooperation has vanished, and the capacity of both countries to solve problems or manage competing interests has atrophied.

Recommendations:

1. The United States needs to concentrate foremost on shoring up the sources of its national strength, principally its domestic dynamism, its global leadership, and its alliances and partnerships. Prestige will be defined by performance.
2. America’s ability to outpace China will be determined much more by what the United States does at home and abroad to restore its global leadership than by what it does toward China.

The Penn Project on  
**THE FUTURE OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS**

---

**“U.S.-China Military Relations in an Era of Strategic Competition”**

Joel Wuthnow, National Defense University

Findings:

1. Increasing tensions in the Indo-Pacific region are raising the chances of an accident or miscalculation involving U.S. and Chinese forces.
2. As strategic competition has increased, the frequency of military exercises between U.S. and Chinese naval forces has dramatically diminished
3. The U.S. and China have common interests in better coordination for Korean Peninsula contingencies and in devising rules of behavior that shape their interactions in space, cyber, and nuclear domains.

Recommendations:

1. The U.S. military should strengthen efforts to work with counterparts in China on conflict management agreements that reduce the risks both face in the event of crises or dangerous incidents between their military forces.
2. The U.S. should renew exercises between U.S. and Chinese naval forces that build trust at the operational level and encourage conformity with existing agreements such as the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea.
3. The U.S. military should restructure vital military exchanges with Chinese counterparts to better serve the goals of risk reduction and crisis management while preserving American security interests.

**“Is the Nuclear Genie Out of the Bottle? Strategic Stability in U.S.-China Relations”**

Fiona Cunningham, George Washington University

Findings:

1. Deteriorating political relations, the unraveling of U.S.-Russia arms control, and long-planned nuclear modernization by both the U.S. and China have increased the salience of nuclear weapons in the U.S.-China relationship.
2. The new attention to nuclear weapons accentuates longstanding risks of nuclear use and incentives for an arms race underpinned by asymmetries in the relationship.
3. Including militarily significant technologies other than nuclear weapons— missile defenses, anti-satellite systems, long-range strike conventional weapons, and cyber capabilities—reveals greater symmetry in the overall strategic balance between the U.S. and China.

Recommendations:

1. The U.S. should initiate a dialogue with China that incorporates both nuclear and nonnuclear strategic capabilities as the best path to forestall a Cold War style arms race and reduce the risks of conflict.
2. A more comprehensive, bilateral dialogue will increase the feasibility of proposals for nuclear risk reduction and limitations on military capabilities that have already been put forward by experts on both sides, compared to trilateral efforts that are narrowly focused on nuclear weapons.