Mutually Assured Restraint:  
A New Approach for United States–China Relations

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To avoid the United States and China falling into the Thucydides trap, in which a dominant power’s fear of a rising power leads to war, both nations would be well-served by further embracing a strategy of mutually assured restraint proposed here, of which some elements are already in place. Political scientists argue that when a new power arises and an old power does not yield ground and privileges, wars ensue. However, the record shows that there are no historical iron laws or trends that inevitably unfold. Harvard University’s Graham Allison points to four cases out of 15 since the sixteenth century in which the emergence of a new power was not followed by war—including the United States’ rise as a global power in the 1890s. Thus, it may not be written in the stars that the United States and China are fated to clash. War—to paraphrase the UNESCO Constitution—starts in the minds of men, and there it can be ended. It is precisely this kind of violent confrontation that mutually assured restraint, if embraced, could help the United States and China avoid by creating the conditions for addressing China’s legitimate concerns while leaving ample room for the United States to discharge that which it considers to be its international obligations.

Distrust between the United States and China has increased in recent years, despite a close connection between the two countries’ economic well-being and an increase in trade between the two nations. The United States is

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a key market for China’s goods, and China is a leading foreign holder of U.S. Treasury securities. A study by Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi illustrates the rising tensions reflected in statements in which China accuses the United States of attempting to “sabotage the Communist Party’s leadership” and the United States holds that China’s “mercantilist policies harm the chances of American economic recovery.”4 The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which maintains an inflation-adjusted database of military expenditure for each country worldwide, reports that China spent $33 billion in 2000 and $129 billion in 2011—an 11-year compound annual growth rate of about 13 percent.5 By contrast, the United States spent $382 billion in 2000 and $690 billion in 2011, an 11-year compound annual growth rate of 5.5 percent.

That China’s economy is growing at a rapid pace suggests it could afford a still stronger military. Its annual GDP percentage growth rate is still more than twice that of the United States’ GDP in 2012 despite a recent slowdown.6 Above all, China has developed a series of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) weapons reportedly capable of preventing the United States from effectively protecting Taiwan and Japan or exercising free navigation in the region; these developments are viewed by the U.S. military as a challenge to the United States’ position in the region. The most prominent example of these A2/AD weapons is anti-ship missiles, which cost little and can incapacitate the expensive American aircraft carriers that represent a key component of U.S. power projection. In response, the United States developed the Air–Sea Battle concept.7 It seeks to build faster, smaller ships and develop weapons—including direct energy arms, a type of laser that if positioned on ships could “burn” incoming missiles—that can neutralize the new Chinese A2/AD ones. Critics have been particularly alarmed that, because direct energy arms have yet to be developed, the Air–Sea Battle concept calls for striking anti-ship missiles on the Chinese mainland. Such an attack is more likely to result in full-fledged war with China rather than a local skirmish over control of the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.8 If current trends continue, with tensions and militaries building up, the prophets of a war between a rising power and an established one may be proven correct. For this reason, curbing tensions and capping military buildups—both objectives of mutually assured restraint—are paramount.

As a paradigm of action, mutually assured restraint seeks to inject substance into the vague phrases mouthed by both powers: China aims to have a “new model of major-country relations” with the United States, and the United States seeks to build a “cooperative partnership” with China.9 Mutually assured restraint is a foreign policy based on mutual respect, a quest for confidence building,
and a set of new institutionalized arrangements that would move both powers away from situations that could escalate into major conflicts. Accordingly, each side would limit its own military buildup and use of coercive diplomacy as long as the other side does the same. Furthermore, these self-restraint measures would be vetted in ways spelled out below. Thus, China would be free to take the steps it deems necessary for its self-defense and the maintenance of its ally relationships without threatening other nations or the international commons. At the same time, the United States would be free to take the steps it believes are necessary to preserve its self-defense, its obligations to its allies in the region, and the international order.

Critics of mutually assured restraint might suggest that any strategy that includes the term “self-restraint” would be anathema to the militaries of both the United States and China. However, self-restraint—defined as not yielding to impulse but rather deliberating before acting and having the capacity to choose a course of action rather than following urges—is a mark of civilization. For militaries, self-restraint means planning and assembling the forces needed for an operation rather than charging forward unprepared at the slightest provocation. Self-restraint also involves refraining from going “a bridge too far,” outrunning supply lines, or exhausting one’s stock of ammunition. Self-restraint, albeit of the kind that can be verified by the other side, is not to be conflated with externally imposed restraint, which is frustrating as is typical for imposed limitations.

There is a precedent for one element of mutually assured restraint, that of mutual vetting. In this sense mutually assured restraint follows President Ronald Reagan’s line “trust but verify,” a concept whose value is reflected in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and New Start), the vetted treaties between the United States and Russia that limit strategic weapons. That both nations agreed to help each other verify the limitations each nation imposed on strategic forces was an essential element of both treaties. Aside from relying on satellite surveillance for verification, START stipulates on-site inspections in the United States by Russian officials and vice-versa, including examinations of the location and number of intercontinental missiles and nuclear warheads.

The following paragraphs provide outlines of the policies that could be instituted as part of mutually assured restraint. In some cases mutually assured restraint could build on existing elements of foreign policy; in other cases new elements must be introduced if the United States and China are to move toward mutually assured restraint. To proceed, the elements of mutually assured restraint require considerable deliberation, modification, and elaboration well beyond the scope of any essay, as well as give and take between the United States and China.
Clarifying what appears to be an implicit understanding between China and the United States regarding the status of Taiwan would constitute a major step toward defusing tensions between the two powers. Although this implicit understanding was introduced without awareness of or commitment to mutually assured restraint, it is a prime example of an existing element of foreign policy on which mutually assured restraint could build.

The governments of both the United States and China have already demonstrated considerable self-restraint in the matter of Taiwan. Beijing has not yielded to demands from those who call for employing force as a means of “reclaiming” Taiwan as part of the mainland; meanwhile, Washington has not yielded to Americans who urge recognition of Taiwan as an independent country. These measures of self-restraint should be made more explicit by clarifying that so long as China does not violently coerce Taiwan to become part of China, the United States will continue to refrain from treating Taiwan as an independent state.

This explication is specifically needed to further lock in the self-restraint commitments, which take place when such commitments are spelled out and openly declared. The prevailing understanding between the United States and China is opaque; although some experts in international relations say an understanding exists, some suggest that its substance is unclear, and still others deny its existence entirely. This range of responses verifies that the issue could benefit from clarification.

One may ask whether it is best to let sleeping dogs lie. One reason to clarify both sides’ policies is that hawks in both nations use the cause of Taiwan to justify building up the United States’ and China’s respective military forces in an era in which it is necessary for both nations to focus on economic, social, and environmental issues at home. A 2013 report to Congress from the U.S. Department of Defense concurs, stating, “Preparing for potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait appears to remain the principal focus and primary driver of China’s military investment.” For example, China carried out a military exercise in which the People’s Liberation Army simulated “a Normandy-style invasion” of Taiwan.” In the United States, a 2003 report from the Council on Foreign Relations examined China’s growing military power and held that “[minimizing the chances that a cross-strait crisis will occur] means maintaining the clear ability and willingness to counter any application of military force against Taiwan.”

Making an explicit commitment to maintain the status quo standing of Taiwan—unless the people of Taiwan freely and peacefully choose otherwise—
would reduce tensions between the United States and China and highlight the effectiveness of mutually assured restraint as an overarching strategy for United States–China relations.

Cyberspace

Mutually assured restraint is particularly important for restraining the proliferation of weapons, such as cyberarms, that favor those who strike first. Such weapons are particularly destabilizing because they offer tangible incentives to strike before being struck, thereby increasing the probability that a country possessing them will escalate a situation. Cyberarms are malicious computer programs designed to conduct espionage or to disable or destroy physical infrastructure. Because espionage has been a reality of international relations for as long as nations have existed and because “kinetic” cyber weapons remain rare, any mutually assured restraint agreement in the realm of information technology would center on those cyber tools capable of causing physical damage rather than those that collect intelligence.

A draft code that seeks to forestall conflicts involving cyberarms has already been proposed. In September 2011, four countries—China, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—submitted an “International Code of Conduct for Information Security” to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The draft calls for a “consensus on the international norms and rules standardizing the behavior of countries concerning information and cyberspace at an early date.”16 Additionally, the document asks states to pledge “not to use [information and communication technologies] including networks to carry out hostile activities or acts of aggression and pose threats to international peace and security.”17

Critics have found fault in this draft, suggesting it may lead to increased state censorship and control of the Internet. However, these critics have failed to propose an alternate text. It seems more constructive to amend and modify the suggested text than to dismiss it out of hand.

Technical experts have yet to determine whether countries seeking to deploy kinetic cyber weapons in the case of war would benefit if they planted malware in another country’s cyberspace before carrying out such attacks. If this is the
case, both nations could agree not to plant such malware as a way to limit the chances of success of kinetic attacks and hence make them less likely. Testing of nuclear arms has been limited for the same reasons. True, an attacker might proceed without engaging in such preparations, just as a country might deploy a nuclear weapon without pre-testing it; however, the absence of malware in a country’s networks indicates some welcome level of restraint.

**A Buffer Zone**

The United States has formed military alliances, signed agreements allowing the placement of American troops and other military assets, and conducted joint military exercises with many of the countries neighboring China. The United States views these arrangements as agreements between sovereign nations, a way of burden sharing, and part of a drive to contain or counter-balance China; however, China perceives these moves as an attempt at Cold War-era encirclement. China has also sought military alliances of its own with neighboring countries, adding to tensions in the region.

These moves position U.S. and Chinese military forces closer to each other, a proximity that could potentially lead to accidental clashes and conflicts. This risk has been highlighted by multiple incidents, including the April 2001 collision of a U.S. Navy surveillance aircraft with a People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) fighter jet over the South China Sea nine days after an encounter between a PLAN Jianghu III-class frigate and an American surveillance ship in the Yellow Sea near South Korea.¹⁸

Moreover, several countries in East and Southeast Asia have treaties with the United States or China, which in effect give the smaller states in the region a finger on the trigger of a gun belonging to their superpower sponsor. These treaties or informal understandings often state or at least imply that if one of these smaller nations in question engages in a war with one superpower, the other superpower will come to its aid. Some treaties—such as the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan, which is said to cover the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—explicitly entail such a commitment. Others are ambiguous and easily misconstrued by the countries involved—this has been the case in the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Philippines and the relationship between China and North Korea.

It is therefore particularly troubling that some of these smaller states have engaged in provocative behavior. Such provocative behavior could not only lead to war between them and other regional states but could also drag both
superpowers into a confrontation with each other. This is most obvious in the case of the two Koreas. For example, some analysts have acknowledged a possible connection between the construction of a South Korean naval base on Jeju Island and the United States’ “strategic interests in Asia.” Opponents of the base hold that giving the United States access to the base—as is likely to occur—will “provoke China” and “trigger a naval arms race.”19 Other examples are much less dramatic and conflict-prone but are nonetheless concerning. For example, in 2012 the Philippine Navy boarded several Chinese fishing vessels at Scarborough Shoal, allegedly discovering illegally collected corals and live sharks in the process, and attempted to arrest the Chinese fishermen. In response, Chinese surveillance crafts blocked the arrests by situating their vessels between the Chinese fishing boats and the Philippine Navy, leading to a tense standoff.20 Despite the shoal’s location within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone, China has since blocked the Philippines from accessing the area and continues to occupy the shoal with civil maritime law enforcement vessels.

If China and the United States embrace mutually assured restraint, both should treat nations neighboring China similarly to the way Austria was treated during the Cold War: as a buffer zone. An additional model is that of East Germany following reunification; a 1990 agreement between Germany and the USSR stipulated that although the former East Germany would be given the status of NATO territory, neither NATO troops nor nuclear weapons would be stationed in these parts.21 Both powers would be free to continue engaging these nations economically by investing, trading, and providing foreign aid, and they would be allowed to share information and promote educational programs. However, neither the United States nor China would be permitted to extend any new military commitments to countries within the buffer zone. Further, both countries would be required to gradually phase out existing military commitments. Mutually assured restraint would also require that they limit joint military exercises and the placement of military assets within the zone. Above all, both powers would make it clear to their allies that they should not assume the automatic, guaranteed involvement of the United States or China if they engage in armed conflict or war with either of these two powers.

Dealing with North Korea

Mutually assured restraint would make an especially important contribution if applied to U.S. and Chinese approaches to the future of North Korea—particularly if a government collapse occurred there. The RAND Corporation provides
the following description of the currently probable actions of the United States and China in the case of such a collapse:

As chaos develops in North Korea, the [Republic of Korea (ROK)], the United States, and China would all likely send special operations forces (SOF) into the North for special reconnaissance, focused in particular on North Korean WMD facilities. Somewhere, the Chinese SOF would make contact with ROK and U.S. SOF, and unintended or accidental conflict could develop… if conflict were to begin between the ROK–U.S. forces and the Chinese forces, that conflict could escalate significantly in ways that neither side would want.”

The RAND report further recommends that both the United States and China minimize the risk of confrontation by defining a “separation line for Chinese forces versus ROK and United States forces,” according to which Chinese forces would stay north of the line and both American and ROK forces would remain south of it. Policy makers implementing mutually assured restraint should draw on these RAND suggestions (and other similar ideas) to advance an understanding between the United States and China: the concept that if North Korea's regime were to collapse, neither U.S. nor Chinese troops would move into the country. Countries in the region would be much better off if U.S. troops were not based next to the Yalu River and if Chinese forces were not massed next to the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Such a step would reduce the danger that the United States and China might clash as a result of misunderstandings or local provocations. The demilitarization of such a buffer zone would be easy to verify due to contemporary surveillance technology. Consideration should also be given to the possibility of positioning UN peacekeeping forces in the area to supervise the removal of nuclear weapons, facilitate the destruction of chemical weapons, and provide humanitarian aid to avoid a massive flood of refugees from North Korea into China or South Korea. Such understandings would encourage China to do more to motivate North Korea to stop developing its nuclear arsenal, consider returning to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and refrain from provocative behavior. This is significant because as a major supplier of food and energy, China has considerable leverage over North Korea.

The Contested Islands

In recent years, tensions between China and Japan have escalated over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, a tiny chain of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea.
Although according to a Center for Strategic and International Studies report “it is clear that the Senkaku Islands are an inherent part of Japan, as evidenced both by historical facts and international law,” China has nevertheless advanced a claim to the islands. Japan recently purchased three of the five islands from private owners, a step China views as provocative. Chinese surveillance and patrol ships have more frequently navigated the waters surrounding the islands, and China provoked Japan by conducting multiple flights near disputed airspace. China has since declared an Air Defense Identification Zone that covers the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, a step that led South Korea to expand its own zone resulting in overlapping and contested zones. China demanded that Japan consent to a no-entry zone of 12 nautical miles around the islands as a precondition for holding a Sino–Japanese summit; Japan refused. China criticized the United States’ attempts to intervene in the dispute while insisting that bilateral negotiations be the mechanism for reaching a resolution.

At the same time, both China and Japan have taken steps that show a measure of self-restraint similar to mutually assured restraint standards. The Japanese coast guard prevented Japanese nationalists from landing on the contested islands, and China relied on its maritime law enforcement agencies and coast guard rather than involving its military in the area.

To further defuse the tension, all countries involved should not merely curb the means by which Japan and China carry out their conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, but also find a resolution for the conflict itself. Experts have suggested several ways of doing so. Japan and China could submit the dispute to the International Court of Justice or the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. Alternatively, both countries could jointly administer and develop the resources in and around the islands. Sovereignty over the territory could be awarded to one state, while resource-related rights could be assigned to all claimants.

Some observe the probability that the United States and China could enter a war over these small and uninhabited islands is low. However, wars have been known to begin over less important matters. When other factors already predispose the parties to conflict, and national pride and credibility are evoked, potential for war is high. The principles of mutually assured restraint should therefore be extended to conclusively settle the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands one way or another.

Pathways
China is highly dependent on imports of raw materials and energy, a great deal of which comes from maritime trade. China sees itself as highly vulnerable because the strong American naval presence in the region gives the United States the ability to readily block these imports. Some American commentators openly discuss the option of such a blockade, which is considered a moderate way of confronting China relative to the Air–Sea Battle concept.

In response to these concerns and as a result of its broader interest in commercial expansion, China increased its naval presence in the South China Sea and developed a network of ports—termed the “string of pearls”—in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Additionally, China attempted to reduce the country’s reliance on shipping lanes by developing plans, including new Silk Roads, for transporting oil and gas resources by land. Indeed, a system of roads, railways, and pipelines now extends across continental Asia. Some Americans view these pathways as a sign of China’s expansionist tendencies and interest in asserting global dominance. Meanwhile, some Chinese view American opposition to select pathways (for instance, a pipeline from Iran to China) as attempts to contain China’s growth. However, under mutually assured restraint the United States would assume—unless clear evidence is presented to the contrary—that extending land-based pathways for the flow of energy resources and raw materials will make China less inclined to build up its military, particularly the naval forces needed to secure ocean pathways. Therefore, China’s creation of a system of pathways would be considered a win–win situation for both powers.

**LIMITING ANTI-ACCESS AND AREA DENIAL (A2/AD) WEAPONS**

China holds that it needs Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) weapons, especially anti-ship missiles, for self-defense. Meanwhile, the United States views these weapons—which are designed to gain control of a territory and limit one’s adversary’s ability to conduct military operations there—as a threat to its ability to discharge its obligations to Taiwan, Japan, and other states as well as the ability to freely navigate in the region. Both powers should agree to limit the number and range of their A2/AD missiles. These limitations should be verified using methods agreed upon by both parties. Such vetting could entail satellite
surveillance or mutual inspections of the kind provided by START. Furthermore, small numbers of short-range, defensive missiles could also be provided to other nations in the region, such as Japan, thereby curbing one recent source of the pressure on China’s neighbors to build up their military forces.

The idea that A2/AD weapons should be limited has been criticized on the grounds that it is difficult to differentiate defensive from offensive weapons. Although it is possible to imagine circumstances in which defensive arms would aid an offensive strategy, there are clearly differences between the two. Indeed, a particular weapons system may be classified based on whether it is more efficient as an offensive weapon or a defensive one. For example, although tanks can serve defensive purposes, they are much more effective for offensive purposes. Similarly, international relations scholars have pointed out that “nearly all historical advances in military mobility—chariots, horse cavalry, tanks, motor trucks, aircraft, mobile bridging equipment—are generally considered to have favored the offense, while major counter-mobility innovations—moats, barbed wire, tank traps, land mines—have favored defense.”

Similarly, the range, placement, and number of anti-ship missiles have bearing on whether they are more accurately classed as offensive or defensive weapons. If their range and number are limited and they are placed on a nation’s shorelines it is likely that they are meant to ward off an attack and are defensive in nature. If an inordinate number of long-range missiles are placed on ships or outlying islands it is more likely that they are offensive. Mutual surveillance, already in place, can help determine whether the placement and range of these weapons is more defensive, and thus evidence of restraint, or offensive.

Critics may argue that China began its military buildup from a much weaker position than the United States, and thus even-handed restraints would lock China into perpetual military inferiority. However, allowances might be made for this difference by permitting China to place a limited number of short-range anti-ship missiles in defensive locations without countermoves by the United States. Countermoves by the United States would be impossible if the number, range, and position of the anti-ship missiles were clearly associated with an offensive stance. Additionally, critics’ conclusions assume that the best way for a weaker nation to respond to differences in military prowess is to dedicate its resources to a military buildup rather than to urgent domestic needs. Mutually assured restraint assumes the opposite, holding that if China restrains its military buildup the United States may do the same and devote its resources to the “home front”—thereby reducing fears of a sharp disparity between the United States’ and China’s military capabilities while defusing overall tensions.
Responsibility to Protect, No Coercive Regime Changes

In 2005, 188 countries, including China and the United States, endorsed the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine (R2P). The international community pledged “to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect populations” from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity if a state fails to meet its primary obligation to protect its own people.\textsuperscript{42}

However, in 2011, the United Kingdom, France, and the United States turned an armed humanitarian intervention aimed at preventing large-scale killing of Libyan civilians into a coercive regime change. When the ongoing humanitarian crisis developed in Syria in 2011, Western powers openly called for not only a ceasefire but also the elimination of President Bashar al-Assad. Russia, supported by China, strongly opposed these interventions. The two countries invoked the long-established Westphalian norm of sovereignty, holding that no state should interfere by use of force in the internal affairs of another nation.

If the United States and its European allies restrain those who seek to use armed interventions for coercive regime changes and limit their future armed interventions to preventing crimes, specifically genocides, as outlined in the original R2P resolution, China (and Russia) might very well reactivate its support for R2P. Built into mutually assured restraint, such self-imposed restraint on the conditions under which armed humanitarian interventions could proceed would further serve to defuse tensions and reduce grounds for conflict between the United States and China.

Conclusion

Mutually assured restraint is a strategy that seeks to reduce tensions between the United States and China as the two powers learn to accommodate limited, gradual changes in their relative power and roles in South East Asia. It draws on elements already in place. Although these elements were not instituted as components of mutually assured restraint, they nevertheless—especially if further strengthened and extended—could serve as building blocks for such a strategy. Other elements must be added \textit{de novo}.

Critics might argue that mutually assured restraint merely deals with the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of friction between the United States and China or that mutually assured restraint fails to recognize that the strategic goals of the two countries are inherently in conflict.\textsuperscript{43} Regarding the
first point, there are situations in which reducing a rising fever is of value while searching for more profound cures. As for the second point, mutually assured restraint holds that the differences between the United States and China do not concern significant national or “core” interests and that there are few signs that China seeks to become a global power, let alone a hegemonic one. On the contrary, China seems content to allow the United States to absorb the financial and other costs of ensuring the global flow of oil, free passage on the Seven Seas, and stabilization of Middle Eastern governments.

As for regional differences, once one scrapes away any symbolic importance that can be attached to even a pile of rocks and ceases to view every conciliatory move as a sign of weakness, it becomes clear that these problems can be settled without undue difficulties. They do not concern core interests of either side but often reflect more desires to assuage age-old humiliations, matters of prestige or “face,” and a belief that nations who settle differences seem weak. Mutually assured restraint builds on the thesis that one can put aside such secondary considerations and focuses on the fact that both the United States and China have a major shared interest in avoiding an arms race, let alone a war, and that they both face pressing needs that demand they invest whatever uncommitted resources and available attention they have in nation-building at home. Proceeding, mutually assured restraint argues, does not require years long formal negotiations, leading to treaties that must be approved by the US Senate and its Chinese equivalent. Instead, one can proceed by each nation showing a measure of self-restraint, especially in its military buildup and posturing and in engaging in coercive diplomacy—as long as such limitations are matched by the other side, and can be verified.

Notes

5. Monitoring Military Expenditures (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2014). All figures are expressed in constant 2010 USD. Military expenditure is defined as “all costs incurred as a result of current military activities,” including expenditure on the armed forces, including peacekeeping forces; defense ministries and other government agencies engaged in defense projects; paramilitary forces, when judged to be trained and equipped for military operations; and military space activities. It includes all current and capital expenditure on military and civil personnel, including retirement pensions of military personnel and social services for personnel; operations and maintenance; procurement; military research and development; and military aid.”
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6. GDP growth (annual %), World Bank.
17. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
37. Sam Goldsmith, “China’s Anti-Access and Area-Denial Operational Concept and the Dilemmas


