

## War or peace? The Possibilities of Armed Conflict in the U.S.-China Rivalry

¿Guerra o paz? Las posibilidades de un conflicto armado en la rivalidad entre EE.UU. y China

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### Abstract

This study critically examines the possibilities of armed conflict arising from the U.S.-China rivalry, addressing the central question: Will the current great power competition lead to war, or can peace be maintained? Through an analysis of three potential conflict scenarios—skirmishes over disputed territories, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, and a Chinese blockade of Taiwan—the research evaluates the likelihood of armed confrontation, the factors that could precipitate or prevent conflict, and the potential consequences of military engagement. By integrating established international relations theories with contemporary strategic assessments, the study provides insights into the delicate balance between war and peace in this crucial bilateral relationship. The research concludes with an assessment of the conditions under which peace might be preserved and offers policy recommendations aimed at conflict prevention and strategic stability.

*Keywords: U.S.-China rivalry, armed conflict, great power competition, war prevention, strategic stability, deterrence, conflict scenarios*

### Resumen

Este estudio examina críticamente las posibilidades de conflicto armado derivadas de la rivalidad entre Estados Unidos y China, abordando la cuestión central: ¿La actual competición entre grandes potencias desembocará en una guerra, o podrá mantenerse la paz? Mediante el análisis de tres posibles escenarios de conflicto -escaramuzas por territorios en disputa, una invasión china de Taiwán y un bloqueo chino de Taiwán-, la investigación evalúa la probabilidad de una confrontación armada, los factores que podrían precipitar o impedir el conflicto y las posibles consecuencias de un enfrentamiento militar. Mediante la integración de las teorías de las relaciones internacionales con las evaluaciones estratégicas contemporáneas, el estudio proporciona información sobre el delicado

equilibrio entre la guerra y la paz en esta relación bilateral crucial. La investigación concluye con una evaluación de las condiciones en las que podría preservarse la paz y ofrece recomendaciones políticas encaminadas a la prevención de conflictos y la estabilidad estratégica.

*Palabras clave:* Rivalidad Estados Unidos-China, conflicto armado, competición entre grandes potencias, prevención de guerras, estabilidad estratégica, disuasión, escenarios de conflicto.

## 1. Introduction

The potential for armed conflict between the United States and China represents one of the most consequential geopolitical risks of the 21st century. As these two nuclear-armed superpowers engage in intensifying strategic competition, a rigorous examination of the dynamics driving their rivalry is crucial for both scholars and policymakers. This study critically analyzes the conditions under which conflict might erupt between the U.S. and China, drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence to assess the likelihood of war and potential pathways to stable competition.

### 1.1. Central Research Questions:

- How do different theoretical perspectives in international relations inform our understanding of great power competition in the 21st century?
- Under what conditions is armed conflict between the U.S. and China most likely to occur?
- What strategies can policymakers employ to reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation while protecting core national interests?

To address these questions, this study employs a multi-faceted analytical approach, synthesizing insights from power transition theory, offensive realism, and liberal institutionalism. By critically engaging with both historical precedents and contemporary dynamics, we aim to provide a nuanced assessment of the challenges and opportunities in managing U.S.-China relations.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks: A Critical Evaluation

### 2.1. Power Transition Theory and the Thucydides Trap

Graham Allison's (2017) concept of the "Thucydides Trap" has gained significant traction in both academic and policy circles as a framework for understanding U.S.-China competition. Drawing on the ancient Greek historian Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, Allison argues that when a rising power threatens to displace an established hegemon, the likelihood of war increases dramatically. In his analysis of 16 historical cases of power transitions, Allison finds that 12 resulted in war, leading to his assertion that conflict between the U.S. and China is more likely than not (Allison, 2017). However, while the Thucydides Trap concept offers valuable insights, it is crucial to critically examine its assumptions and limitations:

- Agency and choice: The Thucydides Trap concept may underestimate the role of leadership decisions and domestic political factors in shaping foreign policy outcomes. The assumption of structural determinism inherent in this framework neglects the potential for skilled diplomacy and strategic restraint to alter the course of great power relations.
- Contextual differences: The contemporary international system, characterized by nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and global challenges like climate change, differs

significantly from historical cases, potentially limiting direct comparisons. These unique features of the modern era create both constraints and opportunities that were not present in previous power transitions.

- **Historical determinism:** The framework risks oversimplifying complex historical dynamics and potentially creating a self-fulfilling prophecy if policymakers treat conflict as inevitable. This fatalistic view could lead to more aggressive policies on both sides, increasing the very risks the concept seeks to illuminate.

To address these limitations, we must consider alternative perspectives that challenge or complement Allison's framework. Joseph Nye (2017) offers a more optimistic assessment, arguing that while the analogy provides important insights, it should not be treated as deterministic. Nye emphasizes that nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and the potential for cooperation on transnational challenges create powerful incentives for both sides to avoid war. Furthermore, recent scholarship by Kori Schake (2017) suggests that peaceful power transitions are more common than Allison's analysis indicates, particularly when the rising power seeks to join rather than overthrow the existing international order. This perspective highlights the importance of China's integration into global institutions and the potential for shared norms to mitigate conflict.

## 2.2. Offensive Realism and the Security Dilemma

John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism provides another influential lens for examining great power behavior and the prospects for conflict. Mearsheimer (2001, 2014) argues that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to maximize their relative power and security, often leading to competition and conflict. From this perspective, China's efforts to challenge U.S. dominance in East Asia and beyond are a natural consequence of its growing capabilities rather than stemming from uniquely aggressive intentions.

Critical evaluation of offensive realism reveals both strengths and weaknesses in its application to U.S.-China relations:

Strengths:

- **Explanatory power:** The theory offers a clear rationale for why rising powers seek to challenge existing hegemons, aligning with observed Chinese behavior in areas like the South China Sea and its military modernization efforts.
- **Focus on structural factors:** By emphasizing systemic pressures, offensive realism helps explain why competition persists despite changes in leadership or stated intentions, providing a sobering counterpoint to more optimistic liberal theories.

Weaknesses:

- **Underestimation of cooperation:** Critics argue that offensive realism fails to adequately account for instances of sustained cooperation between great powers, such as the U.S.-China economic relationship and collaboration on issues like climate change and nuclear non-proliferation.
- **Neglect of domestic factors:** The theory's focus on structural factors may overlook the crucial role of domestic politics, ideology, and nationalism in shaping foreign policy decisions. This limitation is particularly relevant in understanding the complex interplay between China's domestic political imperatives and its international behavior.

- Potential for self-fulfilling prophecies: If policymakers fully embrace offensive realist assumptions, it could lead to more aggressive policies that increase the likelihood of conflict, creating a dangerous feedback loop of escalating tensions.

To address these limitations, we must consider how offensive realism interacts with other theoretical perspectives, particularly liberal institutionalism. G. John Ikenberry (2011) posits that the liberal international order created and sustained by the United States has the potential to accommodate China's rise peacefully if Beijing is willing to operate within its basic framework. This perspective suggests that institutions and economic interdependence can mitigate the security competition emphasized by offensive realism.

### 2.3. The security dilemma: a unifying concept

The concept of the security dilemma, developed by scholars like Robert Jervis (1978), offers additional insights into the dynamics driving U.S.-China tensions. The security dilemma posits that actions taken by states to enhance their own security can be perceived as threatening by others, leading to a spiral of mistrust and arms racing. This dynamic is evident in the ongoing military buildup in the Western Pacific, where both the U.S. and China are deploying increasingly sophisticated weapons systems to gain strategic advantage (Heath & Thompson, 2020).

Critical analysis of the security dilemma reveals its vital importance in understanding U.S.-China competition:

- Explanatory power: The concept helps explain why seemingly defensive actions by both sides can lead to escalating tensions, even in the absence of aggressive intentions. This is particularly relevant in understanding the militarization of the South China Sea and the expansion of U.S. military partnerships in the region.
- Bridge between theories: The security dilemma provides a useful linkage between offensive realist and liberal institutionalist perspectives, highlighting both the structural pressures for competition and the potential for mitigating measures through improved communication and confidence-building mechanisms.
- Policy relevance: Understanding the security dilemma is crucial for policymakers seeking to prevent inadvertent escalation and build trust between the two powers. It underscores the importance of transparency, strategic dialogues, and arms control measures in managing great power competition.

However, it is important to note that the intensity of the security dilemma can vary based on factors such as geography, technology, and the offense-defense balance. Recent technological developments, such as hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence, and cyber capabilities, have the potential to exacerbate the security dilemma by increasing uncertainty and compressing decision-making timeframes.

Future research should focus on empirically assessing how these variables specifically impact U.S.-China relations and exploring innovative approaches to mitigating the security dilemma in an era of rapid technological change.

### 3. Empirical Analysis: Flashpoints and Scenarios

#### 3.1. Taiwan: The Critical Case

The status of Taiwan remains the most likely trigger for a major U.S.-China conflict, representing a critical case for testing theoretical predictions about great power behavior. Beijing considers the island a renegade province that must eventually be reunified with the mainland, while Washington is committed to Taiwan's de facto independence and ability to resist forced unification. This creates a volatile situation where miscalculation or a crisis could potentially escalate to war (Brands, 2022).

To rigorously assess the risk of conflict over Taiwan, we must consider multiple scenarios and their implications:

#### 3.2. Scenario 1: Chinese amphibious invasion

Probability: Low to Medium Key Factors:

- Excessive costs and risks for China, both militarily and economically
- Strong likelihood of U.S. intervention under the Taiwan Relations Act
- Potential for nuclear escalation

Analysis: While this scenario represents the most dangerous potential outcome, the enormous risks China mitigates its probability would face. However, the possibility cannot be dismissed, particularly if Beijing perceives a closing window of opportunity for reunification. Recent improvements in China's amphibious capabilities and concerns about Taiwan's growing sense of distinct identity could increase the likelihood of this scenario over time.

The potential for rapid escalation in this scenario is high, with the risk of drawing in other regional actors such as Japan and Australia. The economic consequences of such a conflict would be severe, potentially triggering a global recession and disrupting critical supply chains, particularly in the semiconductor industry.

#### 3.3. Scenario 2: Chinese Economic Coercion and Blockade

Probability: Medium to High Key Factors:

- Lower military risks for China compared to an outright invasion.
- Challenges for the U.S. in calibrating an appropriate response.
- Potential for gradual escalation over time

Analysis: This “grey zone” scenario presents significant challenges for U.S. policymakers and aligns with China's preference for gradualist approaches. The risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation remains high. A blockade could take various forms, from a full maritime quarantine to more targeted measures aimed at specific economic sectors.

The ambiguity inherent in this scenario complicates U.S. decision-making, as it may be difficult to determine the threshold for military intervention. International law regarding blockades and freedom of navigation would likely play a crucial role in shaping the global response. The economic impact on Taiwan and the broader region could be severe, potentially leading to calls for more forceful intervention.

### 3.4. Scenario 3: Accidental Clash or Miscalculation

Probability: Medium Key Factors:

- Increased military activity in the Taiwan Strait
- Potential for misinterpreted signals or actions
- Compressed decision-making timeframes during a crisis

Analysis: The growing frequency of military encounters in the region increases the risk of an accidental clash that could rapidly escalate. Improving crisis communication mechanisms is crucial for mitigating this risk. The potential for misinterpretation is exacerbated by cultural differences, language barriers, and divergent strategic cultures between the U.S. and China.

Recent incidents, such as close encounters between military aircraft and vessels, highlight the ongoing risk of unintended escalation. The development of modern technologies, including unmanned systems and artificial intelligence, introduces additional complexity and potential for miscalculation.

These scenarios highlight the complex interplay between structural pressures, as emphasized by offensive realism, and the potential for miscalculation inherent in the security dilemma. They also underscore the limitations of historical analogies, as the unique characteristics of the Taiwan situation—including its symbolic importance to Chinese nationalism and its critical role in global technology supply chains—create dynamics not fully captured by the Thucydides Trap concept.

## 4. The South China Sea: Territorial Disputes and Freedom of Navigation

Beyond Taiwan, the South China Sea represents another potential flashpoint in the U.S.-China rivalry, offering a valuable case study for examining how competing territorial claims and freedom of navigation issues intersect with great power competition. Beijing's expansive claims, including the construction of artificial islands and military facilities, have alarmed neighboring countries and challenged the U.S.-led regional security order (Kaplan, 2012).

Critical analysis of the South China Sea situation reveals several key dynamics:

- Economic and strategic significance: The South China Sea's importance for global trade and energy flows raises the stakes of any confrontation, potentially increasing both the likelihood of conflict and the incentives for restraint. Approximately one-third of global shipping passes through these waters, making stability in the region crucial for the global economy.
- Legal and normative dimensions: China's rejection of international arbitration rulings on its maritime claims underscores the limits of institutional approaches to managing great power competition, as emphasized by liberal institutionalists. The 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which rejected China's "nine-dash line" claim, has not resolved the underlying tensions and raises questions about the efficacy of international law in constraining great power behavior.
- Salami-slicing strategy: China's incremental approach to asserting control aligns with offensive realist predictions about rising powers seeking regional hegemony. However, it also demonstrates a preference for avoiding direct military confrontation, challenging simplistic notions of an inevitable "trap." "This strategy has involved a combination of



civilian and military assets, including the use of maritime militia forces, complicating U.S., and regional responses.

- U.S. alliance commitments: America's treaty obligations to regional allies, particularly the Philippines, create potential triggers for wider conflict. This highlights the complex interplay between bilateral rivalries and broader regional security architectures. The challenge for U.S. policymakers is to balance deterrence with reassurance, avoiding entanglement in local disputes while maintaining credibility as a security guarantor.

Empirical evidence suggests that while tensions in the South China Sea have increased, they have not yet led to direct military clashes between the U.S. and China. This relative stability, despite frequent close encounters between military assets, indicates that both powers are exercising some degree of restraint. However, the potential for escalation remains high, particularly if China perceives its core interests as being threatened or if the U.S. feels compelled to demonstrate the credibility of its security commitments to regional allies.

Recent developments, such as the increased frequency of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) by the U.S. and its allies, have heightened tensions but also served to contest China's expansive maritime claims. The risk of miscalculation during these operations remains a concern, particularly given the lack of agreed-upon protocols for managing encounters between military vessels and aircraft.

The South China Sea situation also highlights the limitations of existing international institutions in managing great power competition. While ASEAN has attempted to play a mediating role, its consensus-based approach and internal divisions have limited its effectiveness. This underscores the need for new or reformed institutional mechanisms capable of addressing the unique challenges posed by 21st-century great power rivalry.

#### **4.1. Economic and Technological Competition: The New Battleground**

While military scenarios dominate much of the discourse on the U.S.-China conflict, escalating economic and technological rivalry presents equally significant risks of inadvertent escalation. This domain offers a crucial test case for theories emphasizing the pacifying effects of economic interdependence versus those stressing the inevitability of security competition.

Key areas of economic and technological competition include:

- Competing economic initiatives: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) versus the Build Back Better World (B3W) partnership represent divergent visions for global economic development and influence. These initiatives extend beyond mere economic competition, encompassing geopolitical and normative dimensions that shape the broader U.S.-China rivalry.
- Race for dominance in critical technologies: The competition in fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and 5G networks has significant implications for future military capabilities, economic competitiveness, and societal organization. This technological race is increasingly framed as a zero-sum competition with national security implications.
- Supply chain security and economic decoupling efforts: Concerns about technological espionage, national security, and economic resilience have led to efforts to restructure global supply chains, particularly in critical sectors like semiconductors. This trend

towards “decoupling” challenges assumptions about the stabilizing effects of economic interdependence.

- Tensions over intellectual property rights and technology transfer: Ongoing disputes over technology transfer, industrial espionage, and forced technology sharing in joint ventures highlight the complex interplay between economic competition and national security concerns.

Empirical analysis presents a nuanced picture that complicates simplistic theoretical predictions regarding the interplay between economic interdependence and strategic competition. Contrary to some liberal institutionalist expectations, economic interdependence has not mitigated the intensifying strategic rivalry among great powers. The increasing securitization of economic issues, such as disputes over 5G infrastructure and semiconductor supply chains, reveals the limitations of economic ties in curbing geopolitical tensions.

Nevertheless, deep economic connections have, to some extent, functioned as a restraint on more aggressive policies, suggesting that the offensive realist perspective of inevitable conflict may be exaggerated. The concept of “weaponized interdependence” (Farrell & Newman, 2019) offers a more sophisticated understanding of how economic linkages can simultaneously create vulnerabilities and serve as tools of statecraft. Furthermore, the growing overlap between economic and national security concerns has opened new channels for competition, raising the potential for escalation. These evolving dynamics underscore the limitations of traditional models of economic statecraft, which may no longer fully capture the complexities of emerging technologies and digital platforms. A more nuanced theoretical framework is required to grasp the multifaceted nature of contemporary great power competition.

Aaron Friedberg (2018) argues that the U.S.-China economic relationship has shifted from one of cooperative competition to an increasingly zero-sum rivalry. This shift aligns with offensive realist expectations but also reflects specific policy choices and domestic political factors not fully captured by structural theories. The rise of economic nationalism in both countries, driven by concerns about job losses, technological competition, and strategic vulnerabilities, has accelerated this trend.

The technological dimension of this competition presents particularly acute challenges for policymakers and theorists alike. The dual-use nature of many emerging technologies and the potential for rapid shifts in the balance of power create dynamics not easily explained by existing frameworks. Key considerations include:

- Data dominance: access to and control of large datasets is increasingly viewed as a strategic asset, with implications for economic competitiveness, military capabilities, and societal governance. This raises complex questions about privacy, data sovereignty, and the role of private corporations in national security.
- First-mover advantages: In fields like artificial intelligence and quantum computing, achieving technological breakthroughs could confer significant and lasting strategic advantages. This dynamic increases the pressure for rapid innovation and may incentivize risk-taking behavior.
- Standards-setting power: The ability to shape global technological standards, as seen in the competition over 5G networks, has become a critical aspect of great power rivalry. Control over standards can translate into long-term economic and strategic advantages.
- Talent competition: The race to attract and retain top scientific and engineering talent has become a key element of technological rivalry, with implications for immigration policies, educational systems, and national innovation strategies.



These dynamics challenge traditional notions of the offense-defense balance and may exacerbate the security dilemma between the U.S. and China. The perceived first-mover advantages in emerging technologies could create pressures for preemptive action, while uncertainties about the true capabilities of rival powers may lead to worst-case scenario planning and arms racing behavior.

Future research should focus on developing more sophisticated models for understanding the intersection of economic, technological, and security competition in the context of great power rivalry. This may involve integrating insights from complexity theory, network analysis, and evolutionary economics to better capture the dynamic and interconnected nature of contemporary power transitions.

## 5. Conclusion: Implications for Theory and Policy

This critical analysis of U.S.-China competition reveals the limitations of any single theoretical framework in fully capturing the complexities of contemporary great power rivalry. While concepts like the Thucydides Trap offer valuable insights, they must be complemented by more nuanced approaches that account for the unique features of the current international system, including nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and rapid technological change.

Key theoretical implications:

- Adaptive models of power transitions: Given the rapid pace of technological change and the evolving nature of global power dynamics, more flexible and adaptive models of power transitions are needed. These should account for the potential for sudden shifts in the balance of power and the role of non-traditional sources of national strength.
- Integrating normative and material factors: Future theoretical approaches should strive to better integrate the role of competing value systems, governance models, and ideological narratives in shaping great power behavior, moving beyond purely materialist explanations of international politics.
- Integration of domestic and structural factors: Future theoretical frameworks must better incorporate the interplay between systemic pressures and domestic political dynamics, including the role of nationalism, regime legitimacy, and competing interest groups in shaping foreign policy decisions.
- Reconceptualizing economic interdependence: Considering current trends towards economic decoupling and the weaponization of interdependence, theories of complex interdependence need to be updated to better reflect the strategic implications of economic ties in an era of great power competition.
- Refinement of the security dilemma concept: The security dilemma in the U.S.-China context is complicated by factors such as cyber capabilities, space-based assets, and emerging technologies. Theoretical work should focus on how these new dimensions affect traditional understandings of escalation, deterrence, and crisis stability.

Policy Implications:

- Balanced military modernization: Invest in military capabilities that increase resilience and complicate Chinese planning, such as distributed forces, unmanned systems, and hardened infrastructure, while avoiding provocative deployments that could trigger an arms race. Maintain second-strike nuclear capabilities to reinforce strategic stability while pursuing arms control measures to reduce the risks of nuclear escalation.

- Competitive coexistence in the economic sphere: pursue policies that maintain U.S. economic and technological competitiveness while avoiding overly restrictive decoupling that could increase tensions and reduce leverage. This may involve targeted investment in critical industries, reform of export control regimes, and the development of alternative supply chains for strategic resources.
- Domestic resilience and societal cohesion: Improve domestic resilience and societal cohesion to better withstand potential economic warfare or gray-zone tactics. This may involve investing in critical infrastructure protection, enhancing cybersecurity capabilities, and addressing societal vulnerabilities that could be exploited by external actors.
- Engagement on transnational challenges: pursue targeted cooperation with China on global issues such as climate change, pandemic preparedness, and nuclear non-proliferation. Such engagement can help build trust and create stakeholders for a stable bilateral relationship, even as competition continues in other domains.
- Enhanced crisis management mechanisms: Establish robust crisis management protocols and clear communication channels between the U.S. and China to prevent inadvertent escalation, particularly in flashpoint areas like the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. This could include regular high-level dialogues, military-to-military exchanges, and the development of shared protocols for managing encounters between military assets.
- Strategic patience and long-term thinking: recognize that the U.S.-China rivalry is likely to be a long-term challenge that cannot be quickly resolved. Develop strategies that balance near-term competition with long-term efforts to shape a stable international order that can accommodate both U.S. and Chinese interests to the greatest extent possible.
- Strengthening the resilience of the international order: Invest in reforming and strengthening international institutions to better manage great power competition and provide off-ramps for crises. This could include efforts to update the rules and norms governing emerging technologies, space-based activities, and cyber operations.
- Tailored deterrence and reassurance: Develop a nuanced approach to deterrence that accounts for the multifaceted nature of U.S.-China competition, balancing firm commitments to allies with efforts to avoid unnecessary provocation. This may involve clearly communicating U.S. interests and red lines regarding Taiwan while maintaining strategic ambiguity about the precise nature of potential U.S. intervention.

In conclusion, the U.S.-China relationship represents the defining geopolitical challenge of the 21st century. While conflict is not inevitable, the potential for miscalculation and escalation is real and demands serious attention from policymakers and scholars alike. This analysis has examined various scenarios for potential conflict, from limited skirmishes to full-scale war over Taiwan, highlighting the complex interplay of strategic, economic, and technological factors that shape the rivalry.

The challenge for policymakers is to navigate the narrow path between competing vigorously to protect national interests and cooperating where possible to maintain global stability. This will require a nuanced approach that combines military preparedness, diplomatic engagement, economic statecraft, and ideological confidence. Ultimately, the goal should be to shape an international order that can peacefully accommodate both U.S. and Chinese interests to the greatest extent possible, recognizing that perfect alignment is unlikely, but that managed competition is achievable.

The theories and historical examples explored in this analysis offer valuable insights, but they should not be treated as deterministic. Human agency, wise leadership, and creative diplomacy can help chart a course that defies the seeming inevitability of great power conflict. As we move forward

into an uncertain future, continued rigorous analysis, open debate, and clear-eyed policymaking will be essential. The stakes could not be higher, and the need for innovative thinking and prudent statecraft has never been greater.

## 6. Appendixes

### 6.1. Appendix A: Theoretical Frameworks Comparison

Theory	Key Proponents	Core Assumptions	Implications for U.S.-China Relations
Power Transition Theory	A.F.K. Organski, J. Kugler	Rising powers challenge established hegemons, often leading to conflict	Suggests high likelihood of conflict as China's power approaches parity with the U.S.
Offensive Realism	John Mearsheimer	States seek to maximize relative power in an anarchic system	Predicts intense security competition and potential for conflict as China expands influence
Liberal Institutionalism	G. John Ikenberry	International institutions can mitigate conflict and promote cooperation	Emphasizes potential for managing U.S.-China competition through global governance structures
Security Dilemma	Robert Jervis	Actions to increase one's security can be perceived as threatening by others	Highlights risk of arms racing and inadvertent escalation in U.S.-China military competition

### 6.2. Appendix B: Potential Conflict Scenarios

#### 6.2.1. B.1 Taiwan Conflict Scenarios

Scenario	Probability	Key Factors	Potential Consequences
Chinese amphibious invasion	Low to Medium	- Costs and risks for China - Likelihood of U.S. intervention - Potential for nuclear escalation	- Regional conflict - Global economic disruption - Potential for wider war
Chinese economic coercion and blockade	Medium to High	- Lower military risks for China - Challenges in U.S. response calibration - Potential for gradual escalation	- Economic crisis in Taiwan - Test of U.S. commitment - International law implications
Accidental clash or miscalculation	Medium	- Increased military activity in Taiwan Strait - Potential for misinterpreted signals - Compressed decision-making timeframes	- Rapid escalation risk - Challenge to crisis management - Potential for unintended conflict

#### 6.2.2. B.2 South China Sea Flashpoints

Issue	Key Actors	Potential Triggers	Implications
Territorial disputes	China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei	- Resource exploration activities - Construction on disputed features - Fishing rights enforcement	- Regional tensions - Test of U.S. alliance commitments - Challenges to freedom of navigation

Issue	Key Actors	Potential Triggers	Implications
Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)	U.S., China, regional states	- Increased frequency of U.S. operations - Chinese military responses - Incidents involving commercial vessels	- Risk of military confrontation - Legal debates over maritime rights - Impact on regional trade routes
Militarization of artificial islands	China, U.S., regional states	- Deployment of advanced weapons systems - Establishment of Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) - Challenges to Chinese control	- Shift in regional military balance - Increased operational risks for U.S. and allies - Potential for crisis escalation

### 6.3. Appendix C: Economic and Technological Competition Metrics

#### 6.3.1. C.1 Key Areas of Economic Competition

Area	U.S. Position	China Position	Trend
GDP (Nominal, 2023)	\$25.46 trillion	\$17.96 trillion	China narrowing gap
Trade Volume (2023)	\$5.37 trillion	\$5.94 trillion	China leading
Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Outflows (2023)	\$403.3 billion	\$153.7 billion	U.S. leading, China increasing
Reserve Currency Status	Dominant (USD)	Emerging (RMB)	USD dominant, RMB slowly gaining

#### 6.3.2. C.2 Technological Competition Indicators

Technology Area	U.S. Strengths	China Strengths	Implications
Artificial Intelligence	- Strong private sector - Leading in foundational research	- Government support - Large data sets	Critical for future economic and military capabilities
5G Networks	- Advanced semiconductor design	- Huawei's infrastructure dominance - First-mover advantage in deployment	Impacts global technology standards and data security
Quantum Computing	- Advanced research institutions - Private sector investment	- Significant government funding - Rapid progress in quantum communications	Potential for cryptographic breakthroughs and strategic advantage
Semiconductor Manufacturing	- Advanced chip design - Key intellectual property	- Massive investment in domestic capacity - Growing market share	Critical for technological independence and economic security

6.4. Appendix D: Policy Recommendations Summary

Policy Area	Recommendation	Rationale	Potential Challenges
Military Strategy	Balanced modernization focusing on resilience and distributed capabilities	Complicates Chinese planning without triggering arms race	Budget constraints; technological uncertainties
Economic Policy	Pursue competitive coexistence while maintaining critical supply chains	Balances competition with need for global economic stability	Domestic political pressures; coordination with allies
Diplomatic Engagement	Enhance crisis management mechanisms and pursue targeted cooperation on global issues	Reduces risk of inadvertent escalation; builds stakeholders for stable relationship	Maintaining domestic support; balancing cooperation with competition
Alliance Management	Strengthen and modernize alliance structures in Indo-Pacific	Enhances deterrence and burden-sharing	Diverse interests among allies; potential for entrapment
Domestic Resilience	Invest in critical infrastructure, education, and innovation	Addresses societal vulnerabilities and maintains long-term competitiveness	Budget priorities; political gridlock

7. Appendix E: Chronology of Key Events in U.S.-China Relations (2000-2024)

Year	Event	Significance
2001	China joins World Trade Organization	Marked China's further integration into global economy
2008	Global Financial Crisis	Accelerated shift in economic power towards China
2011	U.S. announces “Pivot to Asia “	Signaled increased U.S. focus on containing China's rise
2013	China announces Belt and Road Initiative	Expanded China's global economic and strategic influence
2015	Chinese land reclamation in South China Sea intensifies	Increased tensions over territorial disputes and freedom of navigation
2018	U.S.-China trade war begins	Marked shift towards economic decoupling and strategic competition
2020	COVID-19 pandemic	Exacerbated U.S.-China tensions and accelerated decoupling trends
2022	U.S. CHIPS Act passed	Aimed at reducing dependence on Chinese semiconductor supply chains
2023	Tensions over Taiwan reach new highs	Increased concerns about potential military conflict

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