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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA: Deterring military conflict with a global China
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(Music)

FORD: Hi, I'm Lindsey Ford and you're listening to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm a David Rubenstein Fellow in the Foreign Policy program here at Brookings. And, this is day four of our 5-day Global China takeover of the Cafeteria Podcast. I am so pleased to have Caitlin Talmadge and Michael O'Hanlon here in the studio with me today.

Mike is the Director of Research and a Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy program. Caitlin is a nonresident scholar at Brookings and also an Associate Professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University. So, Mike, Caitlin, welcome.

TALMADGE: Great to be here. Hi.

O'HANLON: Thanks, Lindsey.

FORD: On today's episode, we're going to talk about emerging security and military competition between Washington and Beijing and how U.S. policymakers need to think about deterrents, given the rising challenges the U.S. faces from China's military modernization. And, just to be clear, when we talk about deterrents, which is kind of a wonky term for a lot of people, all we really mean here is, how do you dissuade a country from using violent or, as we'll talk about today, coercive means to try to achieve their goals?

And, it's a timely topic, especially this week, where we saw China display a massive array of military hardware in its 70th anniversary parade, and some new capabilities with potentially significant implications when we're talking about

deterrents.

Mike, Caitlin, you've both written really excellent papers for the Global China Project. I would encourage everybody to go read them. Mike, your paper talks about how China is using gray-zone coercion in the maritime domain. And, by gray-zone coercion, what we really mean is just trying to use coercive means without actually sparking conflict to achieve your goals.

Caitlin, you talk about something quite different, which is nuclear policy as an emerging area of competition in the U.S.-China relationship. So, I thought it would be great to have you guys in together for this discussion, because your papers really get at contrasting the equally difficult ends of the deterrents equation.

And, to some degree, I think this really reflects shifts in the conventional balance of power between the U.S. and China in the military domain that has sort of heightened asymmetric forms of military competition, both on the low end in the gray zone and on the high end in the nuclear domain.

So, I want to talk at the beginning about some of the trends that you guys identify in your papers -- gray zone competition, nuclear competition -- and then look at bit at what kinds of deterrents challenges that creates for U.S. policymakers. Mike, let me start with you. Your paper, and you have a recent book, *The Senkaku Paradox*, look at how China is using gray-zone competition.

And, basically, your premise is, it's not big wars that we may need to be

most worried about, it's the likelihood of what you call small skirmishes over small stakes, and the potential for these to quickly escalate and nonetheless have really strategic implications. So, explain to me why today's strategic environment makes these kinds of crises particularly likely and why we're seeing gray-zone competition emerge as such a prevalent topic of conversation.

O'HANLON: Thanks, Lindsey. Well, there's sort of good news and bad news in this. Because, the good news about why we're talking about gray-zone competition is because it's not very likely, at least I don't think, that China's just going to wake up tomorrow and try to take a main populated island of Japan. It's not Hitler's Germany.

We're not living, I don't believe, in that world. We're living in a world where China wants more influence, wants to flex its muscle, expand its power, but wants to avoid war and doesn't really have major territorial ambitions, as best I can tell. They want to be first among equals in Asia. And, you thought a lot and worked on this problem, too.

But, they aren't really willing to go out and do something that would clearly invoke America's core security guarantees to its allies, almost certainly produce an all-out conflict. So, therefore, they stay at this lower level, sort of beneath the radar.

The bad news, as you just alluded to, is that we know historically these kinds of conflicts, once they start, even at a small level, can escalate, and especially if the

two sides start shooting at each other. Who's going to be prepared to accept a loss when they've also already seen 100 casualties?

So, losing face plus losing people puts you in a pretty difficult place, and, historically, powers haven't tended to back down when that's happened, they tended to escalate. And, you wind up in silly wars that should never have happened. But, you know, World War I might be a good example of the kind of thing on my mind.

O'HANLON: So, that's both the good and the bad news. We've got to manage these potential gray-zone threats. The fact that we're worried about those rather than all-out conflict in the first instance, I think, is a reassuring feature of today's international environment. I don't think this world today is as dangerous as the heart of the Cold War, but, there is always the potential for mismanagement and escalation. So, that's the core problem as I see it.

And, the reason why I think gray-zone problems could arise, in addition to China or Russia just wanting to do more, is that they also want to perhaps weaken certain elements of the existing global order, and specifically in Asia the U.S.-Japan alliance.

A lot of Chinese don't like Japan, don't like Japanese, don't like Japan's role in history. They don't think the U.S.-Japan alliance is desirable, because it keeps us right in their neighborhood, with our military forces 50,000 strong on Japan's main islands, and they would just like to see American global power ratcheted back a

step.

So, if they can find a way to probe and pry and create distance between Tokyo and Washington, leave the allies debating with each other about what to do next in a crisis, that could, for them, be the real objective, much more important to them than any island or any sea-holding or maritime interest. So, that's why I think that these scenarios really are worrisome and could happen.

FORD: Yeah, I think this idea of probing is certainly something that we've seen, especially in the maritime domain, as a strategy that China has employed. And, as you said, perhaps China would like to avoid a full-on gray power war with the United States, if it can.

And, so, perhaps far cheaper and far easier to achieve your objectives through these gray-zone methods, where you slowly probe and see how far you can go, how much you can take gradually, whether that's influence operations or maritime coercion in the South China Sea, to achieve your objectives without having to actually spark costly major war.

O'HANLON: Yeah, you almost don't need to make up your mind in advance. You're sort of seeing what you can get away with. And, because you've never taken a step, at least in theory, at least in the more benign interpretation of what this game is all about, you never take a step that in your own mind commits you irrevocably to conflict. You can always theoretically pull back.

And, that's part of why it can be dangerous, because you may have a false

sense of safety with this sort of a strategy. But, it does allow you to sort of incrementally see what you can get away with and assess your ultimate objectives later on. You don't even need to know what they are when you start.

FORD: Yeah, that's a great point. Caitlin, you talk in your paper about nuclear competition, which you say -- get ready, this is going to be a much bigger aspect of the competitive dynamics between Washington and Beijing, which it really hasn't been as much in the past as perhaps you saw between the U.S. and Russia during the Cold War. So, explain to me a bit about your argument. Why do you think nukes are back with the U.S. and China?

TALMADGE: They are back. We don't want to say that like it's a good thing, but I do think it's true. You know, nuclear weapons really have been peripheral to the U.S.-China relationship for several decades. But, currently China, just like the United States and like Russia, is engaged in a major long-term modernization program with respect to its nuclear forces.

And, you mentioned the parade. It's very appropriate that we're recording this on October 1st, because we just saw a lot of those Chinese nuclear capabilities on display. And, we do see China making both qualitative improvements to its forces, in terms of the forces that are better able to hide from U.S. intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, better able to evade U.S. missile defenses, for instance, as well as quantitative improvements. So, it's having more and having better capabilities.

I think it's important to kind of look at these in context, though. A number of folks have kind of looked at China's development with respect to its nuclear arsenal and wondered -- is China maybe moving away from its longstanding no-first-use posture. I actually don't see that in a lot of the capabilities that were displayed, for instance, in the parade today.

But, what I do see is a China that is seeking a more survivable nuclear arsenal, an arsenal that would be better able to credibly pose a threat of retaliation after absorbing a first strike, which, although it might sound far-fetched to Americans, is actually something that concerns China. China is worried about its potential nuclear vulnerability, and so it's trying to improve its survivability as a result.

The problem with that is, Washington, I think, does not look at these improvements in China's arsenal as it grows more sophisticated, more capable, as a benign development, especially when it occurs against the backdrop of some of the things that Mike is talking about and that are also talked about in the broader series of podcasts and in the Global China papers, namely that there is, I think, a worsening political relationship between the two states and also a sense that China's conventional capabilities have really improved as well as its gray-zone capabilities.

And, so, the worry on the U.S. part isn't that China, with these improved nuclear capabilities, is suddenly going to start a nuclear war. That's not what I think

the concern is. I think, rather, the worry is that, if it had a more survivable nuclear arsenal, China might feel more confident initiating a non-nuclear crisis, perhaps in the gray-zone that Mike is talking about, or even at the conventional level over a really high-stakes issue, like maybe Taiwan, and that if China has that more robust nuclear arsenal behind it, that the United States might actually then be inhibited in its response, especially on behalf of an ally, where the U.S. had not been directly attacked but its homeland was suddenly exposed to the possibility of nuclear retaliation, than otherwise would be the case.

And, so, in that sort of situation, I think, there's a worry that the U.S. fear of escalation might limit its options and actually give China a potential advantage. And, that isn't the world that the U.S. really wants to be in. I think it prefers the opposite situation, where the U.S. can act with freedom of initiative and movement and hold China's cities and China's weapons at nuclear risk while protecting its own and actually exploit that danger as a means of deterring China from initiating challenges or getting China to back down, coercing China, as you mentioned in the introduction, if a crisis or a war breaks out.

And, so, if there's survivability in a situation of mutually-assured destruction at the nuclear level between the two states, I think that makes the conventional balance and the sub-conventional balance suddenly a lot more important. And, those are things that the U.S. is worried about, too.

So, overall, I think, although what China's doing is new, it isn't really that

surprising. It's kind of more surprising China hasn't done some of these things with its nuclear arsenal sooner, but it's doing them now, and that is setting off alarm bells in Washington, and I think that spiral is going to continue.

FORD: So, you raised a really important point here, which is that some of the debate that's happening right now around deterrence, really gets to, I think, differing opinions, both about perhaps what Chinese strategy looks like and how the Chinese think about their military strategy, but also how you control escalation and some of the relationship between deterrents in the sub-conventional, conventional, and nuclear space.

So, Caitlin, in your paper you talk a bit about that there is an academic theory which essentially says that mutually-assured destruction actually can bring more stability, but that for U.S. policymakers they're not completely convinced of that argument right now, and that when you look at how the U.S. is approaching nuclear dynamics with China, they're relying more on another paradigm, which you call the stability-instability paradox. Explain that to folks who don't necessarily know what that means.

TALMADGE: Sure. I mean, I think the traditional sort of academic theories of nuclear deterrents would lead one to believe, exactly as you just stated, that the mutual presence of secure second-strike forces, that is, the mutual ability by both sides to withstand a first strike and retaliate and impose unacceptable damage on the opponent, should be stabilizing. Because, if that's the situation, then no one can

win in all that nuclear war, no matter who goes first. So, no one should want to start one.

And, in that situation, nuclear weapons mean that the loser in a war can impose just as much damage on the winner as the winner can on the loser. And, this condition of MAD, according to kind of the traditional thinking, suggests that nuclear weapons not only should deter nuclear war but they should probably cast a really long shadow and maybe even deter conventional war or deter sub-conventional conflict, because there's always the possibility that those smaller-scale conflicts or crises could escalate to that all-out situation of mutually-assured destruction.

And, for those who adhere to this school of thought, they would basically say this is why the Cold War stayed cold, this is why there was no World War III, this is why, you know, since 1945 we haven't seen not only a nuclear war but we haven't seen the sort of great power -- conventional war that we saw prior to that time.

FORD: Right.

TALMADGE: So, you know, for those who think about nuclear weapons that way, they would expect Chinese nuclear modernization of the type we're seeing now to really not be a big deal, because, if anything, it should just reinforce mutual deterrents, it should be stabilizing. And, the U.S. alarm over these developments is kind of puzzling from that perspective. But, as you know, U.S. policymakers don't

really have that perspective.

FORD: No.

TALMADGE: And, I would argue that they actually never have, that they didn't have that perspective in the Cold War, either. There are those who would say, sure, the condition of MAD makes an all-out deliberate nuclear war irrational, but for that very reason, states may try to get away with a lot below the threshold that would ever cause escalation to that level.

And, sort of along the lines that Mike was outlining, they have reasons to maybe probe where exactly that line is, and they might be willing to exploit their opponent's fear of escalation in order to make gains on those lower rungs of the escalation ladder. We might know, for instance, that the mutual presence of secure second-strike forces has not prevented India and Pakistan from displaying some of those types of dynamics. And, I've written about that a bit as well.

And, I think that the U.S. concern today, not unlike in the Cold War, is that if China did engage in some sort of convention, not nuclear, but conventional or sub-conventional aggression against a U.S. ally -- you know, in the past the U.S. not only had conventional dominance over that situation, but it had the ability to make nuclear threats to potentially get China to back down or to deter it in the first place, and that's not really the case anymore. And, it suggests that U.S. policymakers may be looking for something different.

FORD: And, Mike, related to this, as Caitlin was saying, policymakers being

concerned that you might see greater Chinese opportunism elsewhere at the sub-conventional and the conventional level, to some degree you can understand why there would be concerns about that. Because, if you look at the last several years, this gray-zone competition technique, especially in the maritime domain, has become an increasingly prevalent aspect of how China is trying to achieve its goals in the region.

And, I think one of the challenges for policymakers, like I would certainly say, when I was in the Obama administration, figuring out how you deter that kind of incremental gray-zone coercion, and, if you can't deter it, how you respond to it, was an incredibly complex problem for policymakers to deal with. A lot of people would probably say we didn't do this well in the South China Sea.

Right now, I think a lot of the debate, you see it in the National Defense Strategy, you see it coming out of the Pentagon, is this idea of deterrence by denial, which I'll let you explain, because your book and your paper, you really focus more on an approach that you call asymmetric defense. So, explain to me what asymmetric defense is all about, why that's maybe a really smart approach to think about in responding to gray-zone competition, and what this alternate view of deterrence by denial is all about.

O'HANLON: First of all, just a quick historical aside. I just can't help but note -- and we all are obviously well aware of this -- but, China has fought the United States at a time when it did not have nuclear weapons, and we did. It's called the

Korean War. So, this was a different leadership, but, nonetheless, it just goes to show the complexities of --

FORD: Right.

O'HANLON: -- deterrence theory along the lines that Caitlin was mentioning. Also, a very quick single sentence homage to our good friend Janne Nolan who passed away last spring who wrote a great book called *Guardians of the Arsenal* in the late 1980s that talked exactly about Caitlin's point, that even when we say at a doctrinal or public relations or political level, we have this or that nuclear strategy, deep down in the bowels of the Pentagon they're still planning for a decisive first strike. And, that's been true forever and really never buried, even when the Soviet Union, which was a peer in nuclear terms, was our competitors. So, certainly, I think you could assume that thinking is still alive and well today.

Next point, I don't think you folks in the Obama administration failed, because I don't think you really had plausible tools to prevent China, let's say, from militarizing parts of the South China Sea. I think we have to bear in mind our overall position and not get consumed by every tactical setback. You know, if you're the Washington -- well, I was going to say the Redskins – ahead 35 to nothing -- that --

SPEAKER: Let's not use the (Inaudible) --

O'HANLON: If you're the New England Patriots ahead 35 to nothing, you can afford to give up 5 and 10 yards sometimes. And, by the way, maybe there's no alternative. So, what were the realistic tools to stop China from building a few

airfields on Fiery Cross Reef? I don't think we physically could have shot their construction cranes off the island.

We could have gone to a strategy more like what Trump's doing now sooner and used economic warfare against a security moved by China. But, I think it would have been a little bit premature for the seriousness of the transgression, which I think was concerning, but still. In the scheme of things, by the standards of nation state and great power behavior, dredging up and then developing unmanned islands in the scale of human history is not a particularly offensive action, by the standards of great power behavior.

But, if things go to the next level, if they take a Senkaku island, claimed by both Japan and China, administered by Japan, we've said the treaty of -- the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty should apply to the Senkaku Islands, even though we don't have a U.S. position on whose islands they rightfully should be. But, if China were to take one, we have to do something more than you folks did in the Obama years with the South China Sea re-claimed islands.

But, I don't think we go to World War III over that, or even literal and symmetrical lethal use of military force, because it's just too dangerous for the stakes. And, yet you can't let China get away with that, either. You've got to do something that prevents the next step, prevents them from getting ambitious because they've gotten away with this first move.

FORD: Right.

O'HANLON: So, that's where I want to, basically, in short, create a defensive perimeter that prevents further transgressions and then apply a graduated form of economic warfare as our major punishment strategy. And, I don't expect this to necessarily liberate that one hypothetically-occupied Senkaku island very quickly. But, I don't think we need to. The main thing is we need to prevent the problem from getting worse.

So, that's where I think we should, again, bear in mind our overall strength. We're in a pretty good overall grant strategic position vis-à-vis our alliances, vis-à-vis China. We don't need to obsess over each and every eyelet. But, we do need a strategy that prevents the conquest of one eyelet from then whetting the appetite for much more dangerous actions.

So, the asymmetric strategy is, forward defense that's been fortified but does not draw first blood, combined with economic warfare designed to inflict punishment, even if that punishment may or may not produce a reversal of the initial Chinese action anytime soon.

FORD: So, one of the interesting things, I think, and questions in this asymmetric defense approach that you raise is one that you brought up earlier, which is how allies and partners respond. So, tell me, because I can certainly anticipate a situation where the U.S. moves with this asymmetric defense and we focus on economic retribution, which, as you said, will play out over time, and that a Japan per se becomes increasingly worried and under increasing domestic

pressure at home, because, yes, it's Iraq, but it hasn't been liberated and it's in Chinese hands.

So, talk to me about how you think the U.S. should deal with reassurance of our allies in this kind of approach.

O'HANLON: With your permission, I'm going to start with a flip answer and then be a little more serious.

FORD: Have at it.

O'HANLON: Thank you. The flip answer is, our job as Japan's ally is to have Japan's back, keeping their people and their economy and their main territory safe. Our job is not to be their therapist. Our job is not to make every little Japanese anxiety go away. Our job is not to solve every single small security problem for Japan.

Our job is to have their back on the big stuff, and to help them with the small stuff, but not to feel to the point where that anything that Japan worries about or has a political debate about is our responsibility to solve or make go away. And, I say that because I sometimes -- not you, but with respect to our diplomats and people, they sometimes talk as if that is our job.

And, only if it could be so, if only the world could be so happy that Japan would never have to worry about any small, insignificant part of its territory being slightly at risk for a period of time, from the actions of a country that -- Japan itself hasn't done a very good job making stable relations with, frankly. And, that's part of

the problem here. Part of why China would be interested in taking this action is because they don't have a good relationship with Japan, and that's partly, at least in small measure, Japan's responsibility, in my judgment.

So, I do want the Japanese to think we have a credible deterrent strategy. I actually think my strategy is more credible than the current one. Do you really think Donald Trump's going to go fight over the Senkaku islands tomorrow? So, if we're going to hinge everything on a direct military liberation of any attacked territory, I would submit to you that not just Donald Trump but many other American presidents might wonder why that's the right approach.

So, I think my approach, which is more proportionate and less dangerous, actually makes deterrents more credible. And, it can be supplanted on top of -- they're added on top of the possibility of a direct military response. I'm not saying we completely stop the potential threat.

I'm not trying to be China's therapist. I don't want China's anxieties to go away, either. I want them to worry we might just respond militarily. But, in the actual instance where China's taken a Senkaku island, that's a fait accompli. I think our first response probably should be non-kinetic and primarily economic.

FORD: So, one of the issues that comes up in what both of you are talking about and mention in your papers, is sort of how you manage escalation. And, I think that there's a sense that right now, in the Indo-Pacific, you have a greater risk that things could escalate rapidly and quickly. And, how should policymakers think

about dealing with those dynamics, as well as how should they think about creating what we would call off-ramps, right? As things start escalating, how do you actually find the off-ramps to dial it back down?

Caitlin, in your paper, you talk about possibly the prospect of arms control with China and thinking about the kinds of off-ramps we might be able to create in the nuclear relationship. It's a question that's come up a lot lately. Certainly, conversations about arms control in China have been in the news since the Trump administration pulled out of the INF treaty, and there are very divergent, very strongly-held opinions on this issue. So, tell me what you think in terms of the prospects for arms control with the Chinese.

TALMADGE: Sure. I think it's a really important question. I think we have to begin, though, by asking what do we even mean by arms control. I mean, I don't mean to sound like the typical academic -- what does this mean? But, it really does matter. Because, I think our perception of what arms control is is so heavily shaped by the Cold War.

We think arms control and we think bilateral, symmetrical, transparent reductions in nuclear forces, public treaty, that sort of thing, because that's kind of the image that we have from the Cold War. But, the meaning of arms control, I think, can be broader than that, if you think back to some of the really old work on arms control by people like Schelling and Helperin.

They basically just said, look, arms control is not something that you do with

your friends, it's something that you do with your enemies, because, even with your enemies, you have, at times, one would hope, a mutual interest in reducing the likelihood of war, the cost of war if war breaks out, and the costs of preparing for war.

And, I think if that's how we think about arms control with China, with that sort of more expansive concept behind it, I do think that it's something we should be working towards. Now, I don't have to tell you, as someone who's, you know, worked in government, that I think there's a lot of obstacles between here and there, by any definition on arms control.

I think China traditionally has been pretty reluctant to engage in confidence-building measures, transparency measures. And, I think, in a lot of ways that's understandable, because their arsenal has been so much smaller and less sophisticated and vulnerable in ways that are actually outlined in the paper.

I think the U.S. theory of arms control has sort of always been we'll show you what we have and that will deter you, and China's theory has sort of been we won't show you what we have, and that will deter you, right?

FORD: Right.

TALMADGE: And, they're kind of at loggerheads. I think China rightly points out, when people talk about things currently, like not extending the new START Treaty and waiting to try to bring into it, China says why should I get involved in this when my total force levels are so much lower than those of the United States and

Russia?

So, there's a lot of different views of what arms control even is or what the goals would be. But, I do think, as you mentioned, things like off-ramps are important for both sides to think about.

FORD: Yes.

TALMADGE: So, if there are ways to have dialogues to start thinking about even just calibrating very basic expectations about where red lines are for each side, that would be important. One of the things that Mike has mentioned in kind of relaying his paper, and also talks about in his larger book, is that there is an aspect of these gray-zone challenges that is probing, that's seeking information.

Of course, the problem is, you know, sometimes you step over a red line without necessarily knowing, right? And, so, some of that is baked into the equation, but I do think that if you have more dialogue on some of these issues, it might be easier to define where some of those tripwires are in advance.

The other thing that I think is possible is, thinking more seriously about crisis communications channels, right? So, let's say that the red line is crossed. What then are their mechanisms for crisis or wartime communication between the two sides that are credible, that are rapid, that are secure, that might provide an opportunity to clear the air, explain intentions?

That's one of the big problems in my own work that I've identified as a potential mechanism for crisis or wartime escalation, is that once these things get

going, states often make their escalation decisions not just based on an assessment of the military technical balance but perceptual dynamics that govern the intentions they're inferring about the adversary from whatever their military technical assessment is.

And, so, you can't solve that problem with just a bombs-and-rockets sort of solution. I mean, that has to be something that you work on in peacetime and have mechanisms for activating when the balloon goes up.

FORD: Do you guys think that there are credible opportunities to create more of these confidence-building measures, whether we're talking about dealing with gray-zone competition or nuclear competition, in the U.S.-China relationship right now, given the broader kind of dynamics of the relationship?

I mean, in about 2014, Obama administration, we worked on the Maritime Consultative CBMs as well as the air-to-air mechanisms, and I think it was productive having that conversation. But, it was definitely a different point in the relationship than where we are right now. And, I think some of the critiques that I've certainly heard people love against the idea of pursuing confidence-building mechanisms, and it's not totally unfair as -- well, it's lovely if you make a new hotline with the Chinese, but if they don't answer the phone, then who cares?

So, is there a realistic prospect for better kinds of crisis communication mechanisms, confidence-building measures that we could pursue with the Chinese right now?

O'HANLON: I would say yes, but I'm not sure how much it's ultimately going to matter. So, you can do things. They may help a little. They may not solve the problem. So, about the same time that you were developing that very good maritime agreement, Jim Steinberg and I were writing a book on U.S.-China relations. And, Jim had been Deputy Secretary of State, and he emerged from the Obama administration very concerned in a very prescient way about where this relationship was going. Around 2011 we agreed to do this book.

One of the ideas that we put in there, building on what you did and also applauding what you did, was to suggest some kind of an open-skies regimen between the United States and China, like the Warsaw Pact and NATO developed towards the end of the Cold War, where basically you have aerial overflight of parts of each other's territory along pre-approved flight patterns.

And, what this does for China, it gives them a little bit of a sense of symmetry. Because, right now, as you know, we're all over their littoral every day with reconnaissance assets. And, it's 8,000 miles from our homeland and 12 miles from theirs. And, at some point, they push back, as with the 2001 EP-3 episode, where they forced our plane down, and they've objected at others times.

So, I don't know if you would define this as a confidence-building measure, but I would. I think allowing both sides to fly over the territory of each other, -- first of all, we've already shown we can do it, because we let Russia do it for many years and other Warsaw Pact countries, and it's relatively harmless. You can control

where they go. And, yet symbolically it gives China a little more of a sense of parity. So, that's just one example. Do, I think that's going to solve the problem you're describing? No. But, it might chip away at it.

FORD: And, politically, one could see that kind of proposal would be challenging in today's political dynamic.

O'HANLON: Yeah. You'd have to make the case for, first of all, how you're not going to give away the crown jewels, and I think the fact that we'd done it before with Russia is the best example, best proof. But, secondly, you're going to have to make the case for why it's even worth the trouble. So, it's probably going to have to be part of a bigger package of efforts to get along. Maybe you do that when the Chinese finally agree to stop threatening force against Taiwan.

TALMADGE: Well, I feel super optimistic that this is coming really soon then, Mike.

O'HANLON: They can still threaten economic war. I'm going to write a Senkaku Paradox in reverse for them. So, they can threaten economic war against Taiwan, but, as you know -- no, I'm serious, that in the broader sense, leave that particular proposal aside. I think open skies could only be part of a larger package, where you've got enough in there that you can make a case that it might make a meaningful difference in the relationship.

TALMADGE: I think that's right. I think it is a question of chipping away at the problem. And, a lot of these things I don't think have big downsides, and, so,

there is, I think, a worthwhile effort there to, even at the nongovernmental level, just to keep some of those channels open.

But, part of what I'm also trying to highlight in the paper is, the pursuit of arms control may not just be at odds with our times politically, but, also, I think, with the core kind of U.S. strategic theory about what its nuclear weapons are designed to do with respect to China.

I mean, the whole U.S. theory of the case, I think, is that, having a nuclear advantage over China is a real thing, which not everyone believes that there even can be a meaningful nuclear advantage, but that having that advantage is worthwhile. It's something that the United States has pursued for a long time in the Cold War.

It will continue to do so not only versus China but Russia, North Korea. And, the key thing to remember there is that, if you're relying on the strategy of having your nuclear capabilities deter your adversary not just at the nuclear level but potentially all the way down the ladder, that whole strategy relies on threats of escalation to be credible, right? For nuclear weapons to actually exert these deterrent effects, your adversary has to believe that you might actually use them, right? And, so, you end up doing things to make it more credible.

Mike talked about planning for a first strike. I'm sure he meant planning for a first strike if we saw the Soviet nuclear weapons on the launch pad, right?

O'HANLON: Right.

TALMADGE: It's always about damage limitation, not an aggressive first strike. But, the capabilities that you would use to launch an aggressive first strike or to defend yourself against an incoming first strike start to look a lot alike, right? And, so, you do things to make your adversary -- in this case China -- think that your nuclear threats are credible, but in so doing you also may reduce the basis for trust or for doing these arms control measures, and so forth.

And, so, I do think those transparency measures, dialogue, off-ramps, confidence-building measures, there's a variety of things that -- I don't think there's a lot of harm in doing them, and we might make some progress in doing them. But, they cut against the grain of, I think, a very longstanding way of thinking about nuclear weapons in kind of U.S. strategic history, and I think that thinking is alive and well with respect to China today.

FORD: Well, all of this, I think, just highlights that these debates are not going away anytime soon, and these are really difficult issues for policymakers to grapple with right now. So, I'm glad that we have things like the papers that you guys have written out there. I hope people will read them and really mull over some of the proposals that you have put on the table.

Mike, Caitlin, thank you both so much for joining me for the podcast today. I'm Lindsey Ford and this has been the Brookings Cafeteria Podcast. I hope you will join us all tomorrow. I'll be here with Mara Karlin and Leah Dreyfuss to talk about Chinese overseas basing.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press does the book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this fall is Eowyn Fain. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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