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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon from the Foreign Policy Program and I have the real pleasure today of moderating a panel discussion with four of my highly esteemed colleagues, one of whom, Caitlin Talmadge, is first and foremost at Georgetown University, but also with us. A couple of the others of whom of us —c reversed the order, but we're all interested in a common set of questions, as clearly are you today. And these concern the rise of China, the state of U.S.-China military and strategic competition, the stability of the strategic balance involving these great powers, and also more generally to include Russia as well, the state of great power competition in military, but also certainly broader strategic terms.

So, this is a topic that we've all been discussing and thinking a lot about for a long time. You don't need me to give a big song and dance to introduce the subject. I will simply note that part of the impetus for today's panel is the recent release of the annual Department of Defense report on China's military, which as usual has a number of important data elements and some concerning trend lines and data points about recent Chinese activity, behavior, whether in military buildup, military deployment. Not to say that everything is particularly off putting or offsetting or unexpected. And so, today's panel will help us to process some of the information in that report and put things into a broader strategic context.

Certainly, one of the interesting findings that's been coming out gradually into the public domain in recent months has concerned the nature of China's strategic nuclear buildup and the recent revelations that it seems to have intentions of building several hundred more ICBMs or other kinds of long-range strategic warhead capability.

And with that in mind, but also, again, underscoring our broad interest here in the state of great power competition, I'd like to begin with Caitlin Talmadge. And I'm going to pose the same question to each of the panelists to being, which really is what do you make of the recent report, as well as the state of great power competition here as we near the end of the first year of the Biden Administration.

We'll begin, as I say, with Caitlin, and then we'll hear from Melanie Sisson, who is a scholar at Brookings in the Strobe Talbot Center of Security, Strategy, and Technology, which I'm

privileged to direct, and then we will hear from Patricia Kim, who is a Rubenstein Fellow in our East Asia Program. And Patty Kim is a longstanding expert, despite her youthful age, on a number of issues in East Asia and certainly in regard to China and America's allies in the region as well.

So, we'll take a little broader strategic perspective starting, perhaps, with nuclear matters and then going into technology, then regional security. And then Tom Wright, who as many of you will know, is really one of the I think best grand strategists in the United States today. He wrote an outstanding book several years ago, *All Measures Short of War*, which had one of its three main focal points on the rise of China, even though he directs the Europe Center, but inf act we all know now that handling the rise of China, as well as the revanchism of Russia is really a global challenge that requires a concerted American, ally, and partner response from across the globe. And so, it's entirely appropriate, whether Tom is wearing a grand strategy hat or his Europe hat, that he be part of this discussion today.

So, thank you for indulging me and my introduction of my esteemed colleagues and the topic for the discussion today. And now I will pass the baton over to Professor Talmadge.

MS. TALMADGE: Great. Thank you so much, Mike. It's a pleasure to be here with you and with your colleagues, our colleagues, and everyone in the audience interested in these really important issues today. I'm looking forward to the discussion.

So, I'll just kick things off with a few remarks in response to your prompt about reactions to this Pentagon Chinese military power report and kind of how that links up with some of the strategic stability and strategy, and even grand strategy questions that you highlighted.

I want to start off just by saying that I thought this was a really good report and a useful report. It was clear, it was balanced, it was nuanced. And I think we learned a lot reading the report.

For me, as someone who pays attention in particular to China's nuclear forces, the report was honestly pretty stunning in some of its revelations. We know that China's arsenal, you know, has been improving and even with the revelations in the report, China's arsenal is still projected to be quite a bit smaller than the U.S. or Russian arsenals. But I think there's no question at all after reading this report that China is engaged in an unprecedented nuclear buildup, at least unprecedented in terms of its past

nuclear posture. What China's doing now looks really different in terms of both the quantitative growth in its forces and qualitative growth. The report talks about China likely having 700 deliverable warheads by 2027 and possibly seeking up to 1,000 by 2030, whereas now it's kind of been in the 200s. So that's a big change.

But also qualitatively, the report tells us China's nuclear forces are getting more accurate, more capable of penetration of U.S. defenses. Many people may be familiar with this headline making hypersonic glide vehicle test that China conducted of basically what was a space based nuclear capable weapons delivery system a couple of weeks ago — or excuse me, it was reported a couple of weeks ago, but it happened this summer. That kind of fits in as an example of china's increasing diversity of platforms by which it might be able to deliver nuclear weapons in the future. And the report in fact talks about China developing a triad.

So, stepping back and looking at it, you know, why does this stuff matter. Should we be freaking out, should we be relaxed? I think the answer is kind of somewhere in the middle because what's going on here in the big picture is China and the U.S. are in my view entering a deeper state of mutual nuclear vulnerability. And what I mean by that is the situation in which neither side — if they get into a big crisis where the prospect of nuclear war is looming, neither side can protect its population from nuclear attack by the other one, no matter who goes first because there are such robust nuclear forces on both sides. And typically, historically, they associate this state of mutually assured destruction, as it's sometimes called, as being stabilizing, right. Because it obviously reduces the incentive for any rational state to start a war with a nuclear armed adversary.

What concerns me though, is the possibility that this nuclear stalemate, this situation in which there's mutual vulnerability at the nuclear level might make China more willing to engage in coercion, aggression, threatening behavior at the conventional level out of a belief that the United States no longer has the ability to play a nuclear card. In other words, to pressure China to back down at the conventional level. In other words, if neither side is going to use its nuclear weapons because of the state of mutual vulnerability, what's left is the conventional balance of power and the conventional balance of

power I think many in the region would say is not looking that favorable for the United States and its allies. And so, I worry that a U.S.-China nuclear stalemate could actually make war at the conventional or even the sub-conventional gray zone level more likely by taking nuclear escalation risks off the table. And that has some real implications for our allies, for our extended deterrence commitments, not just our nuclear umbrella, but also conventional deterrents of China.

And I know that's something that we have other expertise about on the panel. I'd be happy to elaborate on that a bit later. But I think the implication of this report is not just for the nuclear realm, what should the U.S. be doing — although I think there are some things, we can do there — but also how can the United States strengthen conventional deterrence in the region so that our allies feel reassured that they're not vulnerable to Chinese conventional threats.

So, I think I'll pause there because I think you wanted to keep it pretty short. But I'd be happy to come back and expand on those themes as we go along.

Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: That's a really good framing and begins to answer the question that I was hoping you would touch upon, which is what do you think China's motives may be for the nuclear buildup. But we'll continue I'm sure to discuss that as we now hand the baton over to Melanie Sisson.

Melanie, thanks for joining today and over to you.

MS. SISSON: Thank you, Mike. And thanks, Caitlin, for such a nice kickoff on both counts.

I think, Caitlin, you did a really nice job of bringing to the fore some of the really important strategic considerations here. And I'll start in some sense by agreeing with you and then pointing out where we might diverge. And then I'm eager to see what my other friends on the panel here will have to say.

So, the first point of agreement I think is generally that this report is a very good report. And by that what I mean is that I think it is largely empirical, right. It provides a lot of useful data points, as you called them, Mike, some empirical observations that are analytically useful. And I think it only

strays occasionally into some interpretations that I'm a little bit less comfortable with. And one of those places is in this nuclear realm, right, and looking at what China has in fact been doing. And I'm worried about it because I think it sort of leads to particular kinds of policy implications that may in fact not necessarily be the best for U.S. national security if we were to respond in particular ways.

So, my hope for the report, especially in reading this particular section, is that people will read it with a cool head, right, and an analytical mind as we approach these questions.

So in terms of the nuclear buildup, what I would say is, you know, China's activities in the regard seem to me to be very much in keeping with what we would expect for a large state, growing in power generally and looking to be a competitor internationally, facing an environment in which it perceives the United States to be focusing much more of its attention on it in ways that challenge its own interests, right. So, what I think this brings to mind is that it's maybe time for us to sort of brush the rust off of our Cold War days and our Cold War thinking about nuclear deterrence and about conventional deterrence and about how those things fit together precisely, I think, Caitlin, as you were mentioning.

For me I am less concerned about that in and of itself. What I'm more concerned with is the extent to which we in the United States and in the Department of Defense are prepared to think critically and to develop the concepts that enable us to behave safely, to contest interest safely in that new and changed nuclear environment. If we reach the deep mutual vulnerability that you described, Caitlin, then it does put an emphasis on being able to manage these lesser crises, if you will, as they emerge very responsibly. We did this a lot with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and I think we need to sort of refresh ourselves on how to use the military in these ways in the contemporary environment.

The last note I'll say about strategic stability for now, so that others have ample time too, is the thing that worries me is not so much China's buildup, which again I think is a fairly logical and rational response to current circumstances, what concerns me is how emerging technologies can degrade everybody's sense of second-strike stability. The ways in which these emerging technologies create new dangers that we're unfamiliar with and that we're unfamiliar with them in an environment

where we don't have good multilateral structures for thinking about how to manage those risks, right, and to minimize the likelihood of either catastrophic accident or catastrophic war.

So, thanks again, Mike, and I will cede the mic.

MR. O'HANLON: Excellent. And thank you. I think you're setting up, Melanie, a great conversation about what kinds of crises and what kinds of crisis management might actually now become a little bit more salient if and when we move towards something approaching nuclear parity in the next decade.

But, Patty Kim, thank you for joining. And over to you, my friend.

MS. KIM: Great. Thanks, Mike. And it's a real pleasure to join you and my fellow Brookings colleagues on this panel today.

So, I agree with Caitlin and Melanie that the China military power report provides a great overview of China's military modernization. It's a great resource for those who are interested in this topic. Having said that, I think those who follow this issue closely most likely weren't too surprised with many aspects of the report. But, of course, one of the most headline grabbing parts, as Caitlin and Melanie already discussed, was the updated assessment on China's nuclear expansion efforts.

And so, while previous DoD estimates had projected that China would likely double its nuclear arsenal over the next decade, this new report updates this to say that China is now expected to quadruple its warheads by 2030.

And so, I think this updated assessment, along with reports about satellite imagery showing China building hundreds of new missiles siloes and the report about the recent testing of a nuclear capable hypersonic glide vehicle have all raised questions about China's broader intentions and its claims that it only seeks to maintain a minimal nuclear deterrent, that it continues to uphold a no first use policy, and that it doesn't want to engage in a nuclear arms race.

Interestingly, the Chinese leadership has not come out and explained in clear detail the scope or the rationale for China's expanding nuclear ambitions. And I think many outsiders of China would make the case that Beijing's traditional policy of limited nuclear arsenal keeping seems to be

eroding. But if you look at writings by Chinese analysts in recent years, I think many point out that China's commitment to keep to this limited nuclear arsenal doesn't mean that it needs to stick with a fixed number of weapons, but that this quantity should be dynamic and continue to respond to improvements in U.S. capabilities and missile defense deployment. And I think this is what Melanie was getting at when she talked about sort of these are expected developments, especially in the context of intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, which I think both sides see will persist for the foreseeable future.

Where I think the debate is among Chinese experts is just on how many warheads China actually needs to have a credible second-strike capability. And what's interesting is last year Hu Xijin, the editor of the *Global Times*, which is this nationalistic state sponsored tabloid in China, made waves by saying, oh, China should quickly expand its nuclear arsenal to 1,000 warheads to face off what he calls "an increasingly irrational United States". And at the time many actual nuclear experts in China questioned the necessity and the actual benefit that China would accrue though such aggressive efforts. And apparently this stimulated lots of debate within China and then the Chinese government came out and clarified that Hu's remarks were simply the views of a journalist and didn't represent official policy. But if you — you know, based on the DoD reports and other public reporting, it seems like the pace of China's nuclear expansion efforts are indeed following along sort of more of these extreme views rather than more measured ones that you might find among a relatively smaller community of seasoned nuclear experts in China, which makes me really concerned because it seems like there's little room, if any, for more nuanced views to be expressed at the moment inside China, given Beijing's nationalistic appeals that it will not tolerate foreign bullying and the deep resentment among Chinese leaders and among the general public in China of the increasingly hard line policies that the U.S. and its allies have been adopting vis a vis China.

And, finally, I'll wrap up by saying I think this raises questions about what other longstanding policies that China might shift on beyond the nuclear realm, such as its policies of not entering into military alliances, which is a topic that I wrote on just this week, and I published in *Foreign Affairs* with.

And so, as China looks for way to prevail in long-term competition with the United States, you know, where else might changes to policies and how will these shifts negatively impact the strategic balance and strategic stability, not just in the narrow nuclear sense, but more broadly by elevating the risks of war. These are the types of questions that are at the top of my mind and that we could get into further as we go around.

Thanks.

MR. O'HANLON: Patty, thank you very, very much.

And now let's go to Tom for his opening thoughts. And then we will, as you say, come back to some of these issues that are on the table.

Tom, over to you, my friend.

MR. WRIGHT: Mike, thanks. And it's a great pleasure to be on this panel. I've learned so much already.

I'll just make three points from my —- and just to get to the next stage of the conversation.

The first is, you know, I think when we talk about why this buildup occurred, whether it was the response —- as Melanie said, sort of an expected response to the U.S. posture or something else, you know, we don't —- I don't think we know the answer to that question. It could be that I could be something else.

So, for instance, it could be the rational response of a rising power that wants nuclear parity either for bargaining or because it's commensurate with their position or for their own sort of views of strategic stability. That's one option. But an alternative, as Caitlin was saying, if the intention is actually to prevent escalation in a conflict that China intends to initiate over Taiwan, that is very different. I mean that's much more to do with Xi Jinping's own personal or the country's sort of ambition and intention and the desire sort or for revisionist action and to build a nuclear arsenal commensurate with actually being able to successfully carry out an invasion.

So, one is more sort of offensive leaning, one is probably more sort of status quo oriented, but I don't think anyone sort of knows the answer to it. So, we have to I think take both and

seriously.

The second point is that as I look at it, this nuclear buildup is part of a larger sort of Chinese effort that I think we're likely to see unfold in the coming years to increase the vulnerability of the United States, of the conduct of the United States more generally, right. And it's designed, at least in part, so that if there is a conflict over Taiwan that it's not just something that happened over there, it's something that could potentially happen over here in the U.S. too, with the hope of influencing U.S. public opinion and to drive a wedge between the U.S. and those commitments in the region.

And so, this is something — I think military competition with China, vulnerability to China, the Chinese military, this is something I think is going to come home to people much more maybe than it has in the past. And I don't think that's just confined to the nuclear arena. I mean we can say that in the nuclear arena it's of course a deterrent. So, if the U.S. doesn't escalate then they don't use their nuclear weapons. Many of these technologies are the general capabilities to deliver conventional weaponry to the U.S. could remain.

And the final point is just on extended deterrence. I think this is sort of the big challenge. How do we make extended deterrence sort of credible? If China builds up its arsenal, of course it will be in a much sort of stronger position vis a vis other countries in East Asia. Now the balance is there, given their alliance with the U.S. or their partnerships or agreements, but how do we make those credible I think is a question that arose in the Cold War and will return. And it's fair as well. I think in the nuclear posture review, we're likely to see tensions between sort of longstanding desires on the nonproliferation side versus sort of the extended deterrence side. And we're seeing that in very public debates between the allies and the U.S. and within the U.S. and no first use and sole purpose.

So, I'll leave it there, Mike, for now.

Thanks.

MR. O'HANLON: Excellent, Tom.

So, I want to encourage everyone to interact and just raise points as you see fit but let me put one additional provocation on the table, which to some extent draws on what you've all four

already said, and then just maybe start down the same order with any reactions you have or other points you want to make in responses to each other.

You know, I'm sitting here in my Brookings office, and I've got all the great tomes of previous Brookings generations, people like Dick Betz, who wrote about nuclear balance and nuclear blackmail, and our good friend and former colleague, Martin Indyk is around town sort of peddling his book on Henry Kissinger. And I'm reminded by both those authors about how we would use even a perception of a slight nuclear superiority during the Cold War, when we still had it, to try to influence the outcomes of crises. And frankly if you thought about it from a rational point of view, it wasn't very rational. I mean Henry Kissinger actually put U.S. nuclear forces on alert in order to dissuade the Soviets from sending a few infantry companies down to Egypt in a mess of a conflict that wasn't even going to be a direct threat to Israel's existence anyway. We were just sort of bargaining for position. And Kissinger was prepared to at least pretend to play the nuclear brinkmanship game. I have no doubt the Chinese have studied all that history and read all those Brookings books, as well as the books of all four of you, and discerned that the Americans on this issue do sometimes have a habit of thinking that there's some advantage to be gained in crisis management from even a numerical or theoretical nuclear superiority, even if they have a secure a second strike. In other words, our behavior is not always rational, that we sometimes run nuclear risks over limited stakes, even when we can't have any confidence in protecting ourselves from some degree of nuclear retaliation, if you really imagined the war playing out.

So I guess what I'm trying to ask is sort of isn't Caitlin right — and some of you have already agreed with her, so it's — I'm just really trying to delve into this a little deeper and maybe get some specifics of some scenarios into play in the conversation — isn't it right that if you imagined a U.S.-China conventional standoff over Taiwan happening right now, it's possible the United States would start engaging in nuclear brinkmanship. And essentially threatening China that if they don't stop a blockade or an invasion or what have you, that we will consider using tactical nuclear weapons in the Taiwan Strait to interfere with their inability to re-supply, or something like that. Because our history suggests that we used to do that a lot and therefore China's reaction is perfectly rational. They want to take away that

American checkmate play, that trump card, if you will, that escalation possibility, and allow for crises to therefore be resolved, as Caitlin was saying, at the conventional level where China may have a geographic and other kind of conventional superiority, or at least proximity.

So, could we get into that a whole issue a little bit more, if any of you want to go in that direction? If you don't want to, feel free to respond to other points that have been put on the table already.

But starting with Caitlin. Yes, please.

MS. TALMADGE: Sure, I'll jump in. And thanks, Mike, and thanks to everyone for a really rich set of comments.

So, I think your question relates very much to some points that Melanie and Patty both brought up. Because I think Melanie raises this question of like well, what is the point of what China is doing, right. Because I totally agree with her point that we don't actually know. And I have a piece coming out in Foreign Affairs — knock on wood — in a few days that kind of begins with this premise that, much as you said, in some ways China's buildup — the most surprising this is that it hadn't already happened, right, because China is a big country with lots of wealth and we can think of status reasons and all kinds of reasons that China should want bigger nuclear forces.

So, on the one hand, exactly as you said, maybe it's not about anything too nefarious, maybe it's just sort of doing what great powers kind of do and it's catching up in that sense.

But I think what's somewhat troubling — and this is the point that Patty made that I really want to foot stomp — is that China's ministry of foreign affairs actually has not shed — well, Chinese leadership in general has not shed much light on what the motivations are. And I thought that the MFA statement about the report was kind of the international relations version of I know you are, but what am I. Like you're staying we're doing all this nuclear stuff, well you, America, do all the same nuclear stuff times a hundred — which is kind of true — but didn't actually shed light on motives, right. And the reason this matters I think is because of Mike's question, which is it leads us to then say well what these capabilities could be used for.

And I do worry, exactly as you said, Mike, about the Taiwan scenario. Because what you're describing, you know, a crisis in which an ally that's under the U.S. extended deterrent umbrella is challenged or coerced or attacked by a conventionally superior adversary and the U.S. then relies on nuclear threats to try to either initially deter or to get that adversary to back down. Exactly as you said, that's not something new in American defense policy, that was the bedrock of our entire NATO strategy in the Cold War, right. Like that's what we do.

And it's the premise I think on which these extended deterrence promises are made, right. I mean I think this is only not a significant development if you think U.S. nuclear weapons are only about deterring nuclear attack on allies. If you think U.S. nuclear weapons play a role in deterring conventional coercion, aggression, you know, even sub-conventional aggression — you mentioned blockade, things of that nature — then this is a change. I think absence China clarifying what the motives are, it is going to be alarming to U.S. allies and I think it's going to galvanize responses from both them and the United States to try to shore that up.

The one other quick point I would just add though is I want to highlight something Melanie said, which is these points all the more to why we need to be thinking about crisis communication, military to military communication, those guardrails that were mentioned fleetingly in the discussion of the Biden-Xi summit just a couple of days ago. I think there wasn't a ton of progress made in that area, but we, you know, exactly as she said, I think should want there to be because of the scenarios you're talking about.

MR. O'HANLON: Excellent.

And, Melanie, I want to go to you next, but I want to add in another dimension to the question. You probably have enough to comment on already, but you talked about Cold War analogies, as Caitlin just did. In some sense isn't this even harder than the Cold War though? Not because we have to worry about a worldwide communist menace looking to take over much of the planet necessarily. So maybe in that sense we're in a little better shape, but Taiwan is not even a treaty ally. We don't even recognize it as a country. And in the Cold War, yes, we worried about whether a shifting nuclear balance would make our threats to defend Germany using any and all means at our disposal credible, and we

worried that maybe that credibility is eroding. But Germany's very existence was at stake in these scenarios and Germany was a treaty ally and the center of Western Europe for us.

Taiwan by contrast is none of those things. It's a very impressive small democracy that has important roles in the global supply chain for semiconductors and as a democracy in Asia, but it's smallish, it's not recognized as a nation, it's not a treaty ally. And so somehow linking nuclear deterrence to that becomes even harder and therefore the ability to sort of decouple becomes perhaps even easier for China to pull off with a nuclear build up like this.

Is that a fair concern?

MS. SISSON: I think it absolutely is, Mike. I mean there is no question that the current environment is rife with complications and the sort of flip answer — and I don't mean it to be flip, but the fact is that what these complications mean in part for the United States, the dynamics that you just described, the comparisons between what was clear in the Cold War and what isn't right now, puts the onus on the United States to really get serious about prioritization. What do we care about and how much do we care? Because that's the essence of resolve. How much do we care, meaning how much cost will we accept in the United States to come to the defense of a treaty ally, of Taiwan in its circumstance, or other friends and partners around the world, right. And especially when we talk about nuclear weapons being involved, the stakes just literally couldn't be any higher.

So, we just need some real clarity internal to the United States about these things on which to base that kind of strategy.

I want to return to something that Caitlin said. And between Mike, you and Caitlin and Tom, Patty, the conversation about intentions is the perpetual one, right. It's something you can argue forever but only get to test once kind of thing and hopefully you don't test it in really unfortunate ways.

I want to put one other explanation for China's behavior on the table, and that is emerging technologies, right. So, if you believe that some of the new technologies that have the potential to come into military use sometime in the next — let's call it 10 to 30 years — if you think that those technologies might make it easier to locate nuclear weapons wherever they might be, right, on that basis

alone you have incentive to increase the number of nuclear weapons that you have, right. If what we want for nuclear stability is for everybody to understand that nobody wins, and everybody loses in a nuclear exchange, and you have some basis for concern that the number that you have with which to retaliate will reduce in the onset of any conflict. And you want everybody to know that won't work right, that you'll still have enough to come back with. You have to find ways to create that second strike survivability. So, increasing numerically is one of those ways. Developing a nuclear triad is one of those ways, right.

So, agree entirely, we don't know the answers, but this is why I want us to sort of read this kind of evidence with a cool head, right, and say let's at least be — let's put all of those alternatives on the table and not latch onto the one that makes us sort of the most directly afraid of what China might possibly do.

MR. O'HANLON: Great.

And as I go to Patty and then Tom, let me also remind anyone in the audience who wants to get involved that you can send an email to events@Brookings.edu and that should ideally be channeled through me to our panelists here in the next few minutes, because we're going to speak a little bit longer amongst ourselves and then field some of your questions.

So, Patty, same questions. Over to you.

MS. KIM: All right. There's so much to discuss, so I don't even know where start. Maybe I'll start by bringing up two challenges that I see that I could draw out further on in terms of differences, stark differences in U.S. and Chinese conceptions of strategic stability and the challenges that this creates for strategic risk reduction.

First of all, I think that there are some really big differences in how the United States and China see sort of the — have their nuclear doctrines, their strategic perceptions, and their interests in arms control. I think Beijing's nuclear strategy today has relied on opacity and uncertainty, enhanced deterrence, whereas Washington's traditional approach towards arms control and risk reduction has much more been premised on transparency and through measures like data exchanges, monitoring, and onsite

inspections.

I think that China has made the case that as a smaller nuclear power it cannot be expected to embrace arms control measures along the U.S.-Russia model and that it's no first use policy is transparent enough. And it's tried to push the United States to adopt a no first use commitment or to explicitly recognize mutual vulnerability, which the U.S. has avoided out of concerns for how much this would impact China's risk calculus, as well as those of other nuclear states like North Korea and concerns, as the speakers have already alluded to, about undermining the credibility of the United States' nuclear deterrent in the eyes of U.S. allies who depend on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

So, I think that's one significant challenge you want to keep in mind.

Another challenge is I think the reality is both China and the United States blame each other for shouldering greater responsibility for destabilizing the bilateral relationship and the bilateral nuclear balance. I think Chin and the U.S. tend to cite each other's advancing nuclear and conventional capabilities as necessitating their respective development of increasingly sophisticated conventional and nuclear arms. And it's very interesting. You know, we talked about what are China's intentions. And I think Beijing often likes to make the case that the U.S. is pursuing absolute security or the freedom to attack and the freedom of attack by seeking nuclear hegemony. And it points to recent U.S. withdrawal from bilateral, multilateral arms control treaties, the recent attention that's been given to low yield nuclear weapons, its growing cooperation with allies like Japan and South Korea on regional missile defense, all as evidence of this American pursuit of nuclear hegemony.

So, to sound off, I think there's a big gap between the way that both sides see what stabilizing behavior looks like and who they believe is to blame for the growing instability in the bilateral relationship. And I think this creates some real difficulties in pushing forward bilateral conversations about strategic stability, like Jake Sullivan alluded to in his remarks at Brookings earlier this week, let alone actually advancing agreements on arms control and risk reduction measures.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

And, Tom, over to you before we start to talk about policy options and other solutions and

bring in some of the audience questions that I'm starting to get in abundance right now.

MR. WRIGHT: Yeah, I was going to touch on a little bit of that, Mike, as well. But just one comment first. I mean on this question of intentions, I mean I agree it's impossible to know for sure, and that's obviously the basis for a lot of IR theory that we just don't know and the uncertainty with tensions can affect our response to it.

But I do think that we shouldn't also fall into the trap of just sort of — and I'm not saying anyone on the panel is, but we shouldn't sort of assume that this is an expected response that isn't all that meaningful or consequential because it's what you would expect to see great power do anyway. Because there is a way in which this could be used, I think as Caitlin was saying, to facilitate conventional aggression. And it occurs in a context and the context is a massive Chinese military buildup vis a vis Taiwan and a leader who seems to have a greater sense of, you know, urgency about how he defines the Taiwan challenge, and his predecessors did. So, I think we have to take that seriously. And I think that gets — Mike not to skip ahead — but I think that gets to the question of how to respond. I mean I think most people would agree that it will be very unfortunate if we went into sort of Cold War nuclear overkill, right, and we saw massive sort of nuclear arms race. I think everyone wants to avoid that. But it does make the conventional and allied piece of it crucially important. And strengthening that conventional deterrent but also tending to the regional alliances so China is faced with the prospect of a broader regional conflict if it invades Taiwan and not just an exchange of missile with the United States that sort of makes a point and then they get to sort of keep Taiwan as a result. That there is something that functions as an effective deterrent.

And so, I think we do need to think a lot more systematically in the years ahead. And not just because of this report of course. It's much broader than that. But we need to think about what it means to deter and how basically to preserve the regional stability and equilibrium that we currently have.

MR. O'HANLON: That's very good.

So, now I've got two questions, but they include a number we've received from the audience, and they're going to go in the spirit and direction that Tom just suggested.

My first question for all of you — and you don't all have to comment on each of the two questions but feel free. And we'll start with Caitlin again. But what is the right way to think about arms control as well as nuclear modernization for the United States going forward?

So, do we now have to envision three-way arms control where Russia, China, and the United States are all held to the same kind of ceilings, and we try to convince Russia to come down a little and China not to go up too fast and we all happily meet around 1,000 a piece? Or is that disadvantageous for the United States because China and Russia might be acting more like a block. Now it feels like 2,000 against 1,000. and even if we add in Britain and France on our side, it's still 2,000 or more against 1,500.

So, a number of questions have to do with this question of how do you frame future strategic arms control.

Another set of questions has to do with American nuclear modernization. Are we doing enough, are we doing too much, are we focused on the right systems or not?

Then you may have other ideas as well. But let me basically just ask you to comment on what kind of strategic responses — and as Melanie reminds us, it's not just the nukes, it's other kinds of technologies that are relevant here as well. But what kinds of policy changes for the United States or for multilateral arms control, which you advocate going forward to address some of these challenges.

Caitlin, starting with you please.

MS. TALMADGE: Sure thing. And I think your questions dovetail with a couple of points that Tom made that I wanted to kind of address too.

So, I mean I think — you know, I take the essence of your question to be in the big picture. So, what do we do about this? What implications does this have? And I think in answering that question it's important to keep in mind this point about context that Tom mentioned, right. Like I think China's nuclear development, if that were the only thing that were going on, I think it would be less concerning. You might still have reasons to wonder why are they developing dual capable feeder nuclear capabilities and things that look like they're changes but you might not be as worried about them. But it's

the nuclear changes in the context of growing conventional capabilities, growing regional behavior by China that portends the potential for war in the future or militarized crises and so forth, whether over Taiwan or in the South China Sea. It's that context that makes I think the United States concerned and also makes allies concerned. And I think points to one big set of policies that we really need to be thinking about, which is how do we bolster extended deterrence, and not just extended nuclear deterrence, but extended conventional deterrence. Because for all the reasons Tom listed and that we've been talking about, conventional deterrence I think is what we really need to shore up. And I think there's a lot of ways that we can do that. I think one big way is just thinking about making sure that we actually are prioritizing investments to the Indo-Pacific, even if that comes at the cost of making investments in other regions. I do think we're going to have to make some difficult choices because the defense budget is not going to magically keep going up and up.

But I also think the type of investments that we make is important. We need to be focused on capabilities that allow the United States to deny a Chinese fait acompli. The ability to, as Tom was saying, quickly grab territory like Taiwan and then force the United States to fight to retake it. And there's a bunch of ways that you can do that. I mean we could have a whole other panel on that. But I think allies need to be doing that too. And the allies — I mean I think you are, precisely because of China's behavior, seeing increases in the defense budgets of Taiwan and of Japan and of Australia. It's not enough, but it's movement in the right direction of buying not just more, but I think more of the right things to make themselves hard to coerce, hard to attack. And I think that's really important, bolstering conventional deterrence.

I'll just say one word quickly on the arms control question. I think the biggest thing we need to do about arms control, which I definitely think we should pursue, is to make our definition of it broader. I think our definition of arms control when we hear that term is based on the Cold War, we think it is when two leaders get together and sign a treaty for bilateral symmetrical reductions of large similar arsenals that they then proceed to do through a verification process. We have this kind of tight definition of what we think its. And arms control can be broader than that. Tom Schelling talked about arms control

as something you do with your adversaries, not your friends, and all you need is a mutual interest in reducing the likelihood and costs of war and the cost of preparing for war.

And on that basis, we actually have a lot of mutual interests with China. And Melanie was kind of getting to some of this earlier. I think that well short of getting into treat negotiations over forced reductions, if we even had strategic stability dialogue, if we had crisis communication mechanisms in place, if we had maybe some mechanisms just to show China some of the verification measures that we have to the New START regime with the Russians, and just show them how does an inspection work, how does a pre-launch missile notification regime work. Those would be positive steps in the right direction. And I think you need those to get to arms control.

Last very quick thing on arms control is I will just say China also has an interest ultimately in not letting the U.S.-Russian strategic arms control framework collapse. I don't know that we need to hand jam China into that regime today, but I think if China doesn't get engaged in some form of arms control, that regime is not going to be politically sustainable. And that's ultimately bad for China because that regime caps the two largest strategic arsenals in the world and without that regime China will be facing an unconstrained arm raced definitely with the United States, but also would have a lot less information about both U.S. and Russian arsenals. So, they have an incentive to get on board too, I think.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And as I now hand off the baton, Melanie, to you let me say there are a couple of additional questions that have come in from the audience that may swamp your inbox. You may have enough to say already, but there are some who are curious as to whether we should try to revive an INF treaty that includes China. There are others who wonder if we should increase our deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to the Western Pacific. And on person provocatively asked if we should even put them on Taiwan. I can probably guess your answer to that, but it is a question that I will convey to you and others as we go through this round.

So over to you.

MS. SISSON: Okay. Thanks, Mike.

Yes, I think all of our plates runneth over at this point with the content in front of us.

So, I'm actually going to start back all the way at the top because I want to circle back to a point of agreement with Tom. Yes, absolutely, things can be expected and consequential at the same time. They also can be consequential and not sort of hair raising, right. That they should engender in us a response that's more analytical than emotional. And at a minimum, what I would argue for is just making sure that we address all of the alternative hypotheses that we can to guide policy because it is so very, as you aptly said, it's all so consequential right now. Which leads me — Caitlin and Patty have raised similar points in that regard.

On the note of arms control that you raised, Mike, I am less about the specifics, and I think very in line with Caitlin. I mean the first thing I would say is that before we start worrying about what, we should be worrying about just getting back into the practice of doing it, right. We have actively dissolved a lot of the dense networks that we've had for this kind of multilateral engagement in the past. That's going to take some doing to rebuild it and it's going to take a special effort, especially given the nature of the relationship and sort of the history that we have and don't have with China in this regard. We're going to have to build significant muscles around this. And so, the most important thing I think that we can do today, frankly — and this report is a well-timed basis for that, right. We're talking we still have a window of time. The most important thing we can do is start working in that direction. So, I think, you know, the president's zoom summit is a really important development. Maybe not transformative, but if we can do more things like that and from top down and really start engagement, I think that makes me more hopeful at least that we're moving in the right direction in terms of arms control and making real progress there.

The other questions that came in were INF. I think that falls in that same category, which is I'm much less concerned about the specifics at this point, but more concerned about the act of doing it and getting into the practice of arriving at agreements like that. And I think tactical nuclear weapons are not useful and very dangerous. And so, my answer would be no, I don't think that we should lean towards deployments of tactical nuclear weapons, and certainly not locating any on Taiwan at the moment.

So, I hope that covered at least enough ground and still leaves plenty for others to chime in.

MR. O'HANLON: By the way, as I go to Patty, let me put in a quick advertisement. We don't do a lot of advertising at Brookings, we don't take breaks during the show, so this is sort of like the golf channel where you watch the golfers still playing while there's a commercial on the other side.

But Melanie wrote a fantastic book last year with Barry Blechman, who I had mentioned – – well, who I thought about earlier on my bookshelf — about military coercion and American foreign policy, looking at the kind of crisis responses that we've conducted since 1990 with various tools, including primarily conventional tools of course. But nonetheless, it's very good reading and it does speak to this question of the various kinds of response options we might have in a given situation or crisis.

So, with the advertisement complete, Patty, over to you.

MS. KIM: Great. Thanks, Mike.

Well, there's certainly a lot on the table. Just thinking about broadly what needs to be done, I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done between China and the U.S. to strengthen crisis management mechanisms, to explore risk reduction and arms control measures, as the other panelists talked about, and to advance new norms and codes of conducts, especially in emerging domains, like space or cyberspace, where we really have yet to establish rules of the road.

I think there's also, as Melanie said, a great need to relaunch sustained and substantive official and semi-official bilateral dialogues at the track 1.5 level to be able to deepen understanding of each other's strategic intentions, doctrines, and postures, to discuss the impact of our respective nuclear modernization, drive, and emerging technologies and what this means for each side's concern and interest, and to look for arms control measures as well as crisis management measures to prevent unintended military, and especially nuclear, escalation.

I think as Melanie mentioned, over the last few years a lot of skepticism has developed about talking with the Chines. You always hear from a lot of folks, well what's the point of talking. Are the

nuclear experts that you talk with actually inputting their views in Beijing, do they matter? But I think there is a lot be gained from these discussions. There's a lot to be gained from bringing sober sort of nuclear specialists from China to the U.S. to have these conversations. And so, I would hope that that's an area where the Biden Administration could go forward as the two sides look for ways to talk about strategic stability.

One potential specific item that I might put on the table is perhaps China and the U.S. could look towards jointly affirming that a nuclear war should never be fought and cannot be won. So going back to Reagan-Gorbachev statement. Rather than focusing on more sort of the contentious no first use or mutual vulnerability recognition, I think this kind of affirmation could symbolize commitment by both sides to lower the risks of nuclear war and could perhaps serve as a good first step to work towards more far reaching bilateral and multilateral arms control and risk reduction measures.

So just broadly speaking, I think we need open and sustained communication across military and diplomatic and tech communities at all levels so that we can prevent miscommunication, build trust, and not stumble into a conflict. And I think this week's virtual meeting between President Biden and Xi was a good start. There weren't any concrete deliverables that came out of the meeting, but again it was noted that the two heads of state talked about the need to put strategic stability on the bilateral agenda. And so, I see this as a good sign and then hopefully we'll see more progress on this.

But I think the good news is that there is a recognition in both Washington and Beijing that this is not a sustainable path for the U.S.-China relationship, to be in a free fall, and that we need more dialogue at the leader level to the working levels to prevent conflict and to make sure that we can do more than just prevent conflict, but work together on global challenges, like denuclearizing North Korea, which of course also impacts strategic stability in East Asia.

MR. O'HANLON: Excellent.

And, Tom, over to you. Same set of questions.

MR. WRIGHT: Yeah. I guess I'm a little more skeptical of the potential for arms control measures. And I think the strategic stability sort of announcement that Jake Sullivan, was it yesterday,

was positive, but I think their conception of that is very modest and very limited, right. I mean I think that how they see that is an important sort of step to prevent sort of massive miscalculation, but I don't think there's an expectation that it's going to morph into a larger agenda that might lead to a greater degree of interaction and new norms and new understandings.

And I think the reason for that is that we have two sort of issues here. One is the possibility of a miscalculation, but the other is that we actually do understand each other's intentions reasonably well and the problem is one of deterrence, right. That there is a clash of interests and a clash of views. And to me the more pressing challenge is that latter one, right. And if you look back at the Cold War, it's been mentioned a couple of times already and I hesitate to say it with Caitlin for fear of correction because she knows the history a lot more than I do and probably Patty and Melanie as well, but arms control took a long time to come into being because the conditions weren't present. And you get those conditions through repeated interactions and going to the brink and crises and mistakes and basically trial and error, and each side sort of realizing that it has a strategic interest in a dialogue. I feel like we're a long way from that at the moment. I don't even know if we have the necessary concepts to understand what those conditions will be in the U.S.-China relationship because so much of it is U.S.-Russia centric and it's focused on those sort of strategic nuclear weapons side. And that the new technologies Melanie was talking about are very significant and I think they do sort of change the dynamic. And I think each side still thinks it can win those races and that it has an advantage in moving ahead sort of unilaterally.

So those norms, hopefully they will be developed, but they will be developed in practice I think rather than starting out in a top-down way in a conversation. So, there's no harm at all in having those conversations and in having that engagement. I just wouldn't be too hopeful that it's going to lead anywhere. And I think what we need to sort of focus our efforts on, even as we sort of engage in that track, is try to ensure that we have a stable balance of power, both at the nuclear level, but as Caitlin was saying, more importantly at the conventional level, so that if there are revisionist intentions on China's side, that they will be deterred and we will be able to maintain the equilibrium.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

So, with that in mind, I'm going to give everybody one last minute by way of conclusion and I'm going to give myself a minute too here in a second with that same question, Tom, that you and Caitlin and others have put on the table about what to do and how to restore some of this conventional deterrence even as we look for opportunities to have the dialogues and the arms control.

There are a couple of more questions though, so I'll just mention them to you. You can incorporate them or not, as you see fit, in your final thoughts.

A couple of people are interested in other technologies like competition and artificial intelligence and space. And a couple of people were interested in certain geographic zones of interaction, most notably perhaps the South China Sea.

So, if you want to speak to any of that.

But let me now give my one minute, which is there are two types of military scenarios between China and Taiwan that I most worry about. The one that I've written about the most and emphasized is a possible Chinese blockade of Taiwan. And I would like to have the United States with options that do not require trying to break that blockade through brute military in force in the first instance as our only possible response. Because I think that leads to scenarios where we could lose or need to escalate against the Chinese homeland or do the sort of things that Caitlin has written about and start looking for Chinese ballistic missile submarines in the South China Sea as a prelude to a possible nuclear brinkmanship scenario. And I don't like any of those scenarios very well.

So, I would want to have the option at least of sort of countervailing economic warfare. And if we do use military force as part of that, I'd prefer to use it in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to interrupt supplies headed for China and see if we can squeeze China enough to create diplomatic opportunities

That requires a lot of economic preparation among our allies and ourselves in terms of resilience, because we have to worry about Chinese economic warfare against us in reply.

So that would be one set of responses and it would lead to things like enlarging our national defense stockpile of certain kinds of minerals, diversifying global supply chains, some of the

things we're talking about anyway, but with a little bit more haste and emphasis.

And then secondly on the invasion scenario, even though I think it's a giant cosmic roll of the dice for China that they're pretty unlikely to attempt, I'd like to make it even less thinkable. And here I've been influenced by Chris Froze (phonetic), Bridge Colby, Davok Mannick (phonetic), and our own work here at Brookings and Georgetown. And I think that some of the kinds of concepts for having survivable systems that can be deployed rapidly to the Western Pacific, sensor networks, anti-ship missiles. Also, some of them to be bought by Taiwan for its own self-defense, more than it has so far.

These kinds of capabilities need to be purchased and some of them could be deployed, for example, on loitering underwater unmanned vehicles that are just permanently stationed in the Western Pacific. Others could be aircraft that don't really require runways, whether it's an F-35B or an unmanned system that can be launched from the forests of Okinawa and recovered by parachute and deliver anti-ship cruise missiles.

I'm not trying to be a war monger, but I would like to see us with the capability that even if China starts going after our aircraft carriers and our Okinawa airfields in the early stages of an attempted invasion of Taiwan that we have more credible response options that I believe we do today.

So those are some of the DoD pieces that I would advocate, again not out of a sense of acute anxiety, but just out of a sense of prudence.

And I'm sorry I took more than my one minute, so I'll allow each of you more than one as well as we wrap up, starting with Caitlin.

MS. TALMADGE: Sure. I'll be very quick.

I mean I agree with a lot of what you just said, Mike. And I think the flip side that people need to understand is that if we don't have good conventional options for deterrence and we're not perceived by allies and China to have those good options, I think the pressure is to have more nuclear capability in the regional actually grow. And this goes back to the point about should there be tactical nuclear weapons on Taiwan. I don't think there ever will be tactical nuclear weapons on Taiwan because China's not going to ever let that happen. But I think the logic there is very straightforward and it's the

same logic that is leading to greater interest by Japan and by South Korea in acquiring indigenous nuclear capabilities or potentially in the future maybe hosting U.S. nuclear capabilities or seeing greater deployment of U.S. nuclear capabilities to the region.

And that is kind of where that half leads. Logically that is where we ended up in the Cold War all over Europe when you can't do conventional defense well. So I would just agree with you that trying to have those options without being a warmonger. And the flip side of that, I don't think a lot of people are going to like very much either. And that is kind of where that debate is going.

So I'll pause there.

Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Caitlin.

Melanie over to you.

MS. SISSON: Yeah, thanks, Mike. And thanks to all of my fellow panelists. It's always a delight to learn from you, so thanks for doing this.

Just some real quick comments from me, Mike.

So the first is I think that thematically one of the things that comes out very clearly from everybody's comments is right now is a time for refreshing, revising, being thoughtful about, being creative about how we understand deterrence, right. What does deterrence require, how to do it effectively, how to do it safely, right. I think these are sort of the primary questions that I think I've heard from a lot of the discussion that we have here. And so I really hope that this kind of conversation, the books that you referenced — and thank you for that, by the way also. And my other co-authors, James, Steven, and Barry, and I appreciate it. But it is time to really refresh ourselves intellectually on the concepts and the practices of deterrence. And I think, Tom, you made this point very clearly.

And speaking of Tom, I have to say it's not often that I find myself being the optimist in any room and yet I find myself being a little bit more sanguine than you about the prospects of arms control. And I think the hope, based on what you accurately and aptly I think very well described the learning process, the painful process of developing those sort of structures during the Cold War is that we

can learn from at least some portion of that and do it faster this time, right. We can extract some lessons and use them today in a way that they just weren't available during the prior period. That's a hope, right. I think that you rightly point to some empirical indicators, Patty certainly identified some very important differences in the way these two countries approach these matters that can be challenges. And yet I have to believe that we can at least given it our old best college try to do better faster this time.

So thanks again.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Melanie.

And, Patty, over to you.

MS. KIM: Thanks, Mike. I realize we're almost out of time, so I'll just keep it very brief.

I guess my last point is I don't think shoring up our deterrence capabilities in conjunction with our allies and partners and engaging with the Chinese on strategic stability are mutually exclusive. They're both important. I think that these two things can run against each other at times, but nevertheless they can and should be pursued in parallel.

And of course it's also important to remember that the nuclear element is certainly not the only factor in various Taiwan Strait scenarios, as our panelists have alluded to. And China's toolkit of pressure on Taiwan includes a lot more than just nuclear weapons, from gray zone coercion to diplomatic and economic measures. And so as we think about shoring up Taiwan, we need to see how we can help it address these various pressures. Don't just look at the nuclear weapons. That's my last word.

Thanks.

MR. O'HANLON: Very good.

And, Tom, over to you for the very last word overall for the panel.

MR. WRIGHT: Thanks, Michael. I'll just be super brief, and juts make one point, which is just on your Taiwan blockade point. I guess on the first one. I guess the only sort of amendment I would make to that is I think the focus in such a scenario has to be ensured that Taiwan sort of succeeds and can wait out that blockade, right. So it's not as much about punishing China as it's about ensuring that that blockade fails. I think how to ensure the failure of that blockade is an interesting question that may or

may not sort of involve the use of force. I think we need to think creatively about that.

But more broadly, I would definitely agree with the second point. And more broadly I agree very much with the point that Melanie and others made, that we this is a time I think if not to be creative, at least to think anew about these sort of challenges that we had before that are coming now in a very different form. And if anything, the China military power report and the revelations of the last few months, I mean make it clear that that we think is now absolutely necessary.

But thank you so much. This has been a really terrific panel.

MR. O'HANLON: Yes. And I'll just briefly say, since we're over time, thank you to all of you for an excellent discussion. Thank you to our colleague, Bruce Jones, for suggesting the idea, even if we chose a date that didn't work for his schedule. And much appreciate it to the audience and those who sent in questions and who joined us today.

So we'll sign off from Brookings and we don't "speak to you" in the meantime, happy thanksgiving. Best wishes going forward. Thanks for being here today.

Goodbye.

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