



Research Report

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The United States and China—Designing a Shared Future

The Potential for Track 2 Initiatives to Design an Agenda
for Coexistence

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About This Report

This report describes a scoping investigation that examined the potential value and feasibility of a bold and significant new Track 2 initiative (a discussion among scholars, experts, and sometimes current or former government officials that is designed to generate promising ideas for solving problems or improving relationships) to help stem the decline in U.S.-China relations. Specifically, this scoping effort aimed to test the viability and utility of a Track 2 initiative with a very targeted purpose: to lay out a roadmap to and elements of a medium- to long-term future in which the United States and China can coexist because each side can fulfill its most essential interests on issues of mutual concern. The report reviews the status of U.S.-China relations as of late 2023, the roster of existing U.S.-China Track 2 dialogues, the empirical record of such dialogues, and the criteria for successful Track 2 initiatives. This report's conclusion is that a new Track 2 effort that is specifically focused on the outline of long-term coexistence is both needed and potentially valuable.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

As of this writing in late 2023, U.S.-China relations are headed in potentially dangerous directions. The two countries are locked in a strategic competition that has become more intense and spread to a larger variety of issues over the past five years. Relations are characterized by a growing sense of zero-sum calculations and belief on both sides that the other harbors malign intentions. From a U.S. perspective, Chinese belligerence over territorial issues, predatory trade practices, coercion of many countries over political issues, and threats of military action over Taiwan have created a crisis atmosphere around the rivalry. Senior Chinese officials, scholars, and writers increasingly appear to believe that the United States is hostile to China's development, a potential threat to national unification, and determined to maintain hegemonic control over the international order.

Track 2 dialogues—ongoing discussions among scholars, experts, and sometimes current or former government officials that are designed to generate promising ideas for solving problems or improving relationships—have some demonstrated ability to mitigate rising tensions between countries. These dialogues can do this in several ways. They can generate useful ideas to stabilize rivalries; build personal relationships among influential actors on both sides, inside and outside government; and signal official interest in tension-reduction initiatives. In theory, then, Track 2 dialogues could help mitigate the severity of a U.S.-China rivalry that reflects increasing degrees of mistrust and hostility.

This research, a small-scale scoping investigation, examined the potential value and feasibility of a bold and significant new Track 2 initiative in helping to stem the decline in U.S.-China relations. Specifically, this scoping effort tested the viability and utility of a Track 2 initiative with a very targeted purpose: to lay out a roadmap to and elements of a medium- to long-term future in which the United States and China can coexist because each side can fulfill its most essential interests on issues of mutual concern. The concept is grounded in three core insights. First, each side sees its most essential interests as being partly overlooked by the other; the existing areas of mutual concern leave out the most important concerns of both sides. A process of dialogue can help reframe understandings and elevate such areas of concern. Second, part of the barrier to escaping an increasingly zero-sum mutual antagonism is the lack of any persuasive vision of a future in which both sides can realize their most essential interests without conflict. And third, looking to the medium- or long-range future can help U.S. and Chinese officials, analysts, and scholars escape some of the constraints of the current moment of high mistrust and seemingly irreconcilable views on key issues by interrogating policy assumptions. In particular, classic sources of misperception appear to dog the relationship in ways that demand focused dialogue but also offer avenues for progress if better understanding can be promoted. We discuss this in more detail in the paragraphs that follow.

To examine these issues, we reviewed developments in U.S.-China relations over the past decade and assessments of the direction of the relationship. We also conducted discussions with more than a dozen scholars and experts in U.S.-China relations who have led Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues in the past, and we reviewed existing literature that evaluates Track 2 processes. Our discussions were limited in this phase to U.S. and non-Chinese international Track 2 organizers and participants. It would be useful to add Chinese perspectives on the characteristics of successful Track 2 efforts before finalizing the design of any new approach.

Using that research, we first evaluate the need for dialogues to help stabilize U.S-China relations in Chapter 2. In Chapters 3 and 4, we then review Track 2 processes that are already under way and identify the lessons from experience about what makes for successful dialogues and reviews the literature on their value. In Chapter 5, we suggest a possible design of a new initiative, offering a new concept for the structure of Track 2–style engagements and identifying possible substantive topics around which to build such an initiative. In Chapter 6, we conclude that a major new initiative focused particularly on the theme of coexistence and trying to generate principles for mutual agreement on very specific issues, does have promise—but that the design of such an effort must take account of both the many lessons learned about Track 2 dialogues in general and the nature of strategic and political decisionmaking in contemporary China in particular.

Chapter 2. The Risk of an Intensifying U.S.-China Competition

The need for a Track 2 initiative to define elements of coexistence is clear: The U.S.-China rivalry is intensifying in dangerous ways. Each side is taking military, political, and economic actions that signal an increasingly zero-sum conception of the competition. A recent RAND study, identifying criteria that govern stability in strategic competitions and conducting a comprehensive assessment of the U.S.-China relationship, noted that “The strategic competition between China and the United States has intensified to a level not seen since the Cold War.” The report concluded that:

A comprehensive assessment provides reason for concern that the U.S.-China rivalry could be trending toward instability and volatility. The two countries are unavoidably locked in a deepening competition at the regional and global levels. ... Developments on many critical variables now appear to be undermining stability in both categories. The United States and China have increasingly divergent views of the acceptable status quo—in economic, security, and geopolitical terms. ... There are intense reasons for worry about the future stability of the U.S.-China relationship.¹

More recent RAND assessments of Chinese perceptions, as well as engagements with U.S. officials and scholars, confirm this threatening trajectory. The participants in the rivalry which will help to define the contours of the 21st century have become convinced that they cannot coexist with each other. What has emerged is in many ways a classic security spiral between two would-be hegemonies. World politics is full of examples in which worst-case assumptions about the goals and ambitions of the other side undermined the potential for a stable relationship. Left to its own trajectory, this dynamic could easily produce conflict.

The result, as two seasoned observers—one American, one Chinese—recently put it, is that “Relations between the United States and China have fallen to their darkest depths since the early 1970s. ... Today, officials and commentators all over the world fear that not only is a cold war between the two powers inevitable but also that they will sooner or later come to blows, if not over Taiwan, then in the South China Sea or elsewhere.” They add: “Reverberating in the echo chambers on both sides of the Pacific is a note of profound fatalism, a sense that greater economic tensions and security conflict are inevitable. This view is creating a self-reinforcing vicious cycle, and as long as a sense of resignation pervades both capitals, breaking it may prove impossible.”² Gideon Rachman of the *Financial Times* warned ominously in April 2023 after

¹ Michael J. Mazarr, Samuel Charap, Abigail Casey, Irina A. Chindea, Christian Curriden, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, Arthur Chan, John P. Godges, Eugeniu Han, Timothy R. Heath, Logan Ma, Elina Treyger, Teddy Ulin, and Ali Wyne, *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*, RAND Corporation, RR-A456-1, 2021, pp. 208, 211-212.

² Scott Kennedy and Wang Jisi, “America and China Need to Talk,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 6, 2023.

visiting Washington that, “It was striking how commonplace talk of war between the US and China has become.”³

This section summarizes the primary drivers of these trends. Mutual suspicion is not new, especially on the Chinese side—but it is reaching new levels of intensity, at least in the post-Mao era. The section first reviews Chinese actions and views contributing to heightened tensions, and then U.S. views and actions. It then briefly surveys general sources of misperception that are increasingly affecting the relationship. The resulting portrait describes an emerging rivalry characterized by an especially dangerous perception: Both sides appear to be losing the capacity to conceptualize a world in which each side can realize its most essential national interests. Worse still, both sides increasingly believe that the other is determined to prevent them from creating such a future. If these zero-sum perceptions continue to harden, they will make resolution of even minor issues extraordinarily difficult.

Sources of Hostility: Chinese Actions and Perceptions

Numerous factors on both the Chinese and American sides are now driving this trajectory and undermining the faith on either side in the potential for enduring coexistence. From the Chinese side, a combination of aggressiveness and growing concern about U.S. intentions are fueling the rivalry. The first factor is arguably Chinese behavior. Growing power and influence combined with leadership determined to achieve what it views as China’s rightful status and to successfully resolve various territorial disputes has produced a pattern of coercive belligerence in many of its bilateral relationships, from India to the Philippines to Japan and some European countries such as Lithuania.⁴ China has carried out hundreds of individually coercive or even bellicose actions in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea around areas contested with Japan, border areas with India, and elsewhere. Beijing disputes the origins of these actions, contending that some of them are properly seen as responses to provocations from others. But there can be no doubt that China’s foreign policy has become more assertive.

Beyond coercive measures, China has undertaken other initiatives and policies that, while they may be appropriate for a great power that is seeking influence, are contributing to the climate of mistrust by implying elaborate geopolitical ambitions. One is China’s military buildup, which, though based more on the country’s overall growth rate than military spending growing as a proportion of national output, has nonetheless produced world-class technologies

³ Gideon Rachman, “How to Stop a War Between America and China,” *Financial Times*, April 24, 2023.

⁴ For assessments of Chinese coercive activities see Matthew Reynolds and Matthew P. Goodman, *Deny, Deflect, Deter: Countering China’s Economic Coercion*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 21, 2023; see also Michael J. Mazarr, Bryan Frederick, John J. Drennan, Emily Ellinger, Kelly Elizabeth Eusebi, Bryan Rooney, Andrew Stravers, and Emily Yoder, *Understanding Influence in the Strategic Competition with China*, RAND Corporation, RR-A290-1, 2021.

and capabilities in many areas.⁵ Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appears to some U.S. observers to represent a clear effort to obtain dominant influence over dozens of developing countries, and is accompanied by a parallel effort, the "Digital Silk Road," seemingly designed to dominate the digital networks of other countries, especially developing nations.⁶

These actions have been matched by increasingly aggressive rhetoric from Xi Jinping and senior Chinese officials. Xi's own tough messaging was summed up by one recent tag line of his speeches: "Dare to fight" (which some have translated as "Dare to struggle").⁷ Chinese officials, scholars, and writers view the United States as an increasingly aggressive actor on multiple fronts.⁸ Ideologically, politicians and experts in China view Washington as the perpetrator of zero-sum games with China.⁹ In a recent press conference, China's former Foreign Minister Qin Gang accused the United States of trying to "out-compete" China and urged Washington to "abandon the zero-sum Cold War mentality."¹⁰ According to experts in China, this mentality pervades the economic, technological, and military arenas and drives the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Western countries in a "strategic containment against China."¹¹ Most recently, speaking at the Shangri La summit in Singapore, former Chinese Minister of Defense Li Shangfu launched a harsh broadside against American intentions and behavior in the region.¹²

Some of China's most direct and threatening statements of recent months have focused on the foreign policy issue of chief concern to Beijing—Taiwan. Xi and senior Chinese officials have repeatedly insisted that Taiwan is part of China and have pointedly refused to rule out the

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, November 28, 2022.

⁶ Michael Keane and Haiqing Yu, "A Digital Empire in the Making: China's Outbound Digital Platforms," *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 13, 2019.

⁷ Joe Leahy, Kathrin Hille, Andy Lin, and Michael Pooler, "'Dare to Fight': Xi Jinping Unveils China's New World Order," *Financial Times*, March 31, 2023. For a broader view of Xi's intentions see Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Xi Jinping's Quest for Order: Security at Home, Influence Abroad," *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2022.

⁸ Li Yan [李岩], "What the 'New Washington Consensus' Means for Sino-US Relations" ["新华盛顿共识"对中美关系意味着什么"], *China-US Focus* [中美聚焦], May 22, 2023; Niu Xinchun [牛新春], "The U.S. Is in the Biggest Interfering Factor in China-Iran Relations" [美中才是中国与伊朗关系的最大干扰因素], *World Knowledge* [世界知识], Iss. 6, March 17, 2023.

⁹ Li, 2023; China Foreign Minister Qin Gang, "Foreign Minister Qin Gang Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 7, 2023.

¹⁰ China Foreign Minister Qin Gang, 2023.

¹¹ Niu Xinchun [牛新春], 2023; "The Influence and Enlightenment of the Ukraine Crisis" [乌克兰危机的影响及启示], Research Group of the America Institute, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), February 28, 2023; Li Yan [李岩] and Zhou Ningnan [周宁南], "Trends and Prospects of NATO Network Security Cooperation Eastward Expansion" ["北约网络安全合作东扩的动向及前景"], *Contemporary International Relations*, Iss. 4, April 28, 2023.

¹² "Li Shangfu: China's Defence Minister at Shangri-La Dialogue Warns Of 'Cold War Mentality' In Digs at US," *The Guardian*, June 4, 2023; Chris Buckley, "China Dismisses Defense Minister Amid Swirl of Speculation," *New York Times*, October 24, 2023.

use of force in resolving the issue. As a result, an increasing number of U.S. observers believe that Xi Jinping's China is prepared to use military force to settle its territorial disputes, notably Taiwan, soon. Whether that is true or not, it creates a sense of urgency in U.S. policy.¹³

As aggressive as these actions and statements may be, they appear grounded in part in an honest perception of the United States as a power determined to impair China's emergence as a peer competitor, and the relationship between the two as embodying increasingly zero-sum characteristics.¹⁴ Xi Jinping has declared that "Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-around containment, encirclement and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development."¹⁵ The Chinese Communist Party certainly has self-interested motives for blaming the United States for any current ills, but American experts and Chinese scholars broadly agree that these statements accurately reflect a real sentiment in China today—that the United States is implacably opposed to its rise and is taking actions to suppress its rightful development. A series of recent U.S. actions, such as limits on technology transfer and investment, however justified they may be from a U.S. perspective, offer ample evidence to Chinese officials in support of this argument.

These views are not new. Chinese leaders have harbored suspicions about malign American intentions since the founding of the People's Republic.¹⁶ Autocrats are often paranoid about threats to regime security, and Chinese Communist Party leaders have long worried about U.S. efforts to destabilize their government. Even during periods of relatively good relations after 1979, Chinese officials and experts sustained more hostile views of U.S. power than they often publicly declared. But the Xi Jinping era has seen an spiraling of Chinese coercive pressure, threats of military force, and "Wolf Warrior" attacks on U.S. and allied policies and norms. The mistrust of U.S. intentions has become intense.

These Chinese views and actions appear to enable a rising level of often angry and self-righteous nationalism,¹⁷ particularly among younger generations.¹⁸ Some of them derive in part from what many commentators see as Xi Jinping's profound commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology, including its assumption of a zero-sum ideological conflict with the United States and

¹³ John Pomfret and Matthew Pottinger, "Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War," *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2023. For one of many responses see John Culver, "Root Causes," *Foreign Affairs*, June 6, 2023.

¹⁴ Covell Meyskens, "China Is Pushing Disengagement with the United States Hard," *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2023.

¹⁵ Keith Bradsher, "China's Leader, With Rare Bluntness, Blames U.S. Containment for Troubles," *New York Times*, March 7, 2023.

¹⁶ These are well chronicled in Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*, Harvard University Press, 2018.

¹⁷ Jessica Chen Weiss, "China's Self-Defeating Nationalism: Brazen Diplomacy and Rhetorical Bluster Undercut Beijing's Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, July 16, 2020.

¹⁸ Barclay Bram, "'Generation N': The Impact of China's Youth Nationalism," Asia Society Policy Institute, March 2023.

the West, a view that colors his reaction to all U.S. policies. Such perceptions carry significant risks. As the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has argued,

The danger is that dialectical methodologies and the binary conclusions that they produce can lead to spectacularly incorrect conclusions when applied to the real world of international security. In the 1950s, Mao saw it as dialectically inevitable that the United States would attack China to snuff out the Chinese revolution on behalf of the forces of capitalism and imperialism. ... In similar fashion, Xi now sees threats on every front and has embarked on the securitization of virtually every aspect of Chinese public policy and private life. And once such threat perceptions become formal analytical conclusions and are translated into the CCP bureaucracies, the Chinese system might begin to function as if armed conflict were inevitable.¹⁹

Xi's tough attitude and presumed skepticism of U.S. motives may have created a dangerous hothouse of nationalistic thinking in Beijing. The Chinese scholar Tong Zhao recently argued that "Xi's assertive rhetoric, combined with his demand for absolute obedience, has produced an echo chamber in Beijing," one built around anti-American broadsides and a sense of existential stakes in the rivalry. Political trends reinforce these risks: "China's political system has become much more centralized under [Xi's] leadership, and officials, policy elites, and public opinion leaders all face strong incentives to advocate policies that cater to his desires and discourage anything that may be perceived as dissent."²⁰

Part of the problem is that many medium- and long-term U.S. and Chinese goals are phrased in highly abstract and ill-defined terms. The United States insists upon a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," while China announces goals of a "community with a shared future for mankind." Because these and related goals are so nebulous, the other side can read whatever it wants into them. And those readings are increasingly zero-sum, with the United States, for example, seeing in China's vague phrases an urgent desire for a Sino-centric Asia, and then world, which forces the United States into a permanently subordinate position and suppresses the free choice of nations within the region and beyond. Beijing, for its part, has for over three decades assumed that—despite public U.S. commitment to drawing China into the world community—Washington in fact seeks the destabilization of Chinese Communist Party rule and some form of regime change. It also views American rhetoric about a "free and open" Indo-Pacific as hollow, seeing U.S. initiatives as seeking to exclude China rather than being truly inclusive. In broad terms, then, current U.S. and Chinese conceptual initiatives for world politics, regional security, and bilateral relations appear to hold little prospect of overcoming mutual hostility.

¹⁹ Kevin Rudd, "The World According to Xi Jinping: What China's Ideologue in Chief Really Believes," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2022.

²⁰ Tong Zhao, "How China's Echo Chamber Threatens Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, May 9, 2023.

Sources of Hostility: U.S. Actions and Perceptions

As it has reacted to what it perceives as a growing threat from China, the United States in turn has taken steps and adopted views that are contributing to the spiral of hostility. Most broadly, since at least 2017, two U.S. administrations have identified China as the leading focus of U.S. national security policy and indicated that they are building up U.S. military power in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, one could date some aspect of the U.S. shift to the “Pivot to Asia” policy announced in 2011. This was arguably more a product of an effort to shift U.S. attention away from the Middle East than any effort to “contain” China—but that is now it was perceived by a suspicious Beijing.

This has led to a significant military buildup and effort to enhance U.S. posture and basing in the Indo-Pacific to meet the rising Chinese military challenge. By some measures the U.S. defense budget has increased from around \$580 billion to well over \$800 billion just between 2015-2016 and FY2023. U.S. National Security Strategies and unclassified National Defense Strategies since 2017 have made clear that China is now the “pacing threat” for U.S. defense planning, and the focus of these buildups. The United States has sought to enhance ties with numerous partners in the region, including India, and has announced specific agreements for improved posture with Japan, Australia, and the Philippines.

As part of this effort, the United States has been strengthening U.S. security ties with Taiwan,²¹ coupled with statements from President Biden that appear to override the U.S. policy of ambiguity over its military response to a Chinese invasion.²² Some observers increasingly warn that these dynamics may be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of conflict as each side reads the worst-case scenario into the intentions of the other and doubles down on military preparations.²³ President Biden has in recent years made more definitive commitments and political statements about U.S. intentions in the event of conflict.

Congress has become active in confronting Chinese influence and promoting steps to compete more vigorously. The rivalry with China was a major justification for several recent pieces of legislation on U.S. investment, notably the CHIPS and Science Act and a newly proposed “Competition with China Bill 2.0.”²⁴ The House of Representatives established a new Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, which has taken a strongly critical stance on Chinese intentions and activities. A proposed Taiwan Policy Act would have substantially

²¹ Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “U.S. to Expand Troop Presence in Taiwan for Training Against China Threat,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2023; Edward Wong and John Ismay, “U.S. Aims to Turn Taiwan Into Giant Weapons Depot,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2022.

²² Demetri Sevastopulo, Kana Inagaki, and Kathrin Hille, “Joe Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan Militarily if China Invades,” *Financial Times*, May 23, 2022.

²³ Jessica Chen Weiss, “Don’t Panic about Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2023.

²⁴ For a description of this bill, see “Senate Dems Launch Initiative to Advance National Security & Create China Competition Bill 2.0,” Senator Jack Reed, webpage, May 3, 2023.

boosted U.S. military and political engagement with Taiwan; it did not pass, but many of its security components were absorbed into the most recent National Defense Authorization Act.²⁵

Since 2017, the United States has moved to compete more intensely in economics as well as security affairs. The Trump administration announced a series of tariffs targeting steel, aluminum, solar panels, washing machines and other imports from China, which covered over 1,300 specific items and have cost U.S. consumers an estimated \$48 billion.²⁶ These were only the beginning of a series of economic levers to gain relative advantage, including proposed investment restrictions on capital headed to China as well as a new foreign investment agency, the International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), funded in theory with as much as \$60 billion in investment guarantees. Some had expected these steps to be reversed or at least moderated by the Biden administration, but instead it has doubled down on an active strategy of domestic and international economic competition.

In a closely related arena, the United States has increased technological competition, including efforts to constrain the development of China's highest-end technological capabilities. Partly this effort has involved direct investments in U.S. capabilities, such as the CHIPS Act and components of the Defense and other federal department and agency budgets targeting research and development aligned to national technological advantage. It has included efforts to limit the reach of Chinese technology firms in countries other than the United States, to include Huawei and TikTok. Fears about the influence of Chinese-owned information firms have sharply influenced the U.S. public debate.²⁷

Most importantly, the United States in October 2022 implemented the most significant limits on semiconductor exports in recent history, seeking to deny China access to many U.S.-origin technologies essential for high-end semiconductor fabrication facilities.²⁸ The explicit goal of this program was, as National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan put it, to preserve "as large a lead as possible" in key technology areas.²⁹ The Biden administration then negotiated with Japan and the Netherlands to gain parallel controls on semiconductor-related technology exports, and both allies agreed to some versions of controls. China retaliated in 2023 with limits on imports of chips produced by the U.S. firm Micron.³⁰

²⁵ Richard L. Armitage and Zack Cooper, "Getting the Taiwan Policy Act Right," *War on the Rocks*, August 29, 2022.

²⁶ Inu Manak, Gabriel Cabanas and Natalia Feinberg, "The Cost of Trump's Trade War with China Is Still Adding Up," Council on Foreign Relations, blog, April 18, 2023; Chad P. Bown and Melina Kolb, "Trump's Trade War Timeline: An Up-to-Date Guide," Peterson Institute for International Economics, blog, updated June 1, 2023.

²⁷ William Allen Reinsch, "Paranoia Strikes Deep . . . It Starts When You're Always Afraid," Center for Strategic and International Studies, blog, March 13, 2023.

²⁸ Matt Sheehan, "Biden's Unprecedented Semiconductor Bet," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 27, 2022.

²⁹ "How China Aims to Counter US 'Containment' Efforts in Tech," *Bloomberg*, May 30, 2023.

³⁰ Chang Che, "China Bans Some Sales of Chips from U.S. Company Micron," *New York Times*, May 21, 2023.

As a result of these moves, as one commentator noted, “With little fanfare or public debate, America has embarked on one of its most difficult and dangerous international challenges since the Cold War. The task: reversing decades of economic and technological integration with its chief rival, China. . . . A righteous panic has set in, flattening complex uncertainties.”³¹ Especially in the area of technology competition, the U.S. government and many American commentators increasingly see a zero-sum contest in which any meaningful Chinese gain is a U.S. loss.

The mindset of an urgent, irreconcilable clash has produced other U.S. actions that may be entirely justifiable from a security standpoint, but which nonetheless have intensified the competition. Concern about Chinese spies in the United States, including in academic settings involved with scientific and technological research, helped produce the Justice Department’s China Initiative, because of which over a thousand Chinese researchers and students fled the United States and which generated concerns about a new wave of anti-Asian sentiment more broadly. China has turned a similar security focus on visiting American students and academics. Coupled with years of Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions, this produced a dramatic decline in the numbers of Americans studying there.³²

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine intensified worries about the threat posed by China in the United States by suggesting a potent example of an angry and revisionist great power deciding to use force in disastrous ways—not only for the United States but for many leading U.S. allies as well.³³ The political dynamics around China issues have become explosive, as demonstrated during the intense reaction to the revelation of a Chinese spy balloon transiting the United States in early 2023.³⁴

In all these steps and reactions, U.S. officials and legislators surely believe that they are responding to provocations from China, and this perception has a significant basis. As noted above, Chinese foreign and security policy has indeed become more belligerent. That does not change that the United States has taken many actions whose effect has been to intensify the severity of the rivalry and stoke views in China that the United States has malign intentions. Most of all, trends in the United States mirror developments in Beijing: The growing perception of a zero-sum rivalry in which the opportunity for coexistence is increasingly discounted.

³¹ Jon Bateman, “The Fevered Anti-China Attitude in Washington Is Going to Backfire,” *Politico Magazine*, December 15, 2022.

³² Nirmal Ghosh and Aw Chen Wei, “‘We Might Be Seen as Spies’: US-China Academic Tie-Ups Slow Amid Mutual Suspicion,” *Straits Times*, June 3, 2023.

³³ Kathrin Hille, Leo Lewis, Nic Fildes and Christian Davies, “Ukraine War Hardens Washington’s Asia Allies on China,” *Financial Times*, March 10, 2022.

³⁴ David E. Sanger, “Balloon Incident Reveals More Than Spying as Competition With China Intensifies,” *New York Times*, February 5, 2023.

Sources of Misperception in the Relationship

Our survey of the current state of relations and the sources of hostility in the U.S.-China relationship suggests many of these dynamics reflect a series of classic misperceptions in international relations, catalogued half a century ago.³⁵ Importantly, as noted above, the existence of misperception does not presuppose a moral or geopolitical equivalence between the parties. One rival may be significantly more aggressive and coercive than the other in a bilateral relationship and have less benign intentions—but misperceptions can still threaten the stability of the relationship and thwart steps to allow long-term coexistence.

In his work on the sources of mistrust and misunderstanding in world politics, Robert Jervis described fourteen “Hypotheses on Misperception”³⁶ On his list we find four broad themes that shed light on the U.S.-China relationship today.

A first theme stresses the tendency of officials and observers to acquire firmly held beliefs about the other side and the nature of the relationship that become very difficult to revise, even in the face of contrary or mixed evidence. Jervis also argues that “decision-makers tend to fit incoming information into their existing theories and images,” and that “scholars and decision-makers are apt to err by being too wedded to the established view and too closed to new information, as opposed to being too willing to alter their theories.”³⁷ Another hypothesis outlines the natural result of such mindsets: “Actors tend to overlook the fact that evidence consistent with their theories may also be consistent with other views.”³⁸

This dynamic seems entrenched on both sides of the U.S.-China relationship, perhaps especially in Beijing. Both sides have well-established convictions about the malign intentions of the other that are extremely difficult to change with statements, promises, or even policy initiatives. U.S. officials and scholars routinely worry about the fact that many Chinese interlocutors appear to have extreme, even paranoid assumptions about U.S. intentions that are immune to correction or modification. Chinese officials and experts likely have the same sense of U.S. counterparts. At a certain point, the certainties of both sides risk locking the rivalry into a state of high and irredeemable hostility which will be very dangerous.

A second source of misperception derives from differences in the conceptual, political, and even cultural basis for each side’s perceptions. Jervis argues that “when messages are sent from a different background of concerns and information than is possessed by the receiver, misunderstanding is likely.”³⁹ Describing a distinct but complementary hypothesis he adds that,

³⁵ We are grateful to Rorry Daniels for suggesting this connection.

³⁶ Robert Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” *World Politics* 20, No. 3, 1968, pp. 454–479. See also Robert L. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1976.

³⁷ Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” pp. 455, 459.

³⁸ Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” p. 478.

³⁹ Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” p. 473.

If it is hard for an actor to believe that the other can see him as a menace, it is often even harder for him to see that issues important to him are not important to others. While he may know that another actor is on an opposing team, it may be more difficult for him to realize that the other is playing an entirely different game. This is especially true when the game he is playing seems vital to him.⁴⁰

There seems little doubt that gaps in backgrounds and perceptions of political reality create a gulf between U.S. and Chinese officials and even, in many cases, experts and scholars. The role of Chinese Communist ideology exacerbates the problem: Chinese cultural-civilizational differences in perspective make open and clear dialogue difficult enough, but when Chinese Communist Party officials are interpreting events through the added lens of Marxism-Leninism, the danger of fundamental misunderstanding becomes even more severe. Such worldviews lead both sides to interpret the “game” that the other is playing in inherently suspicious and antagonistic ways.

Jervis’s hypotheses offer a third theme relevant to current U.S.-China relations—the danger that each side will exaggerate the clarity of its own messaging. “When people spend a great deal of time drawing up a plan or making a decision,” Jervis argues, “they tend to think that the message about it they wish to convey will be clear to the receiver.” In a related hypothesis he suggests that “when actors have intentions that they do not try to conceal from others, they tend to assume that others accurately perceive these intentions.”⁴¹ We see some evidence that both U.S. and Chinese officials appear regularly frustrated that what they see as a simple and clear message is not being understood by the other side. When the reaction is negative or untrustworthy, this leads them to impute hostile intentions to the other side.

Fourth, Jervis points out that national decision makers often “tend to see the behavior of others as more centralized, disciplined, and coordinated than it is.”⁴² This view can cause misunderstandings when actions generated by one part of a rival’s system are seen as reflecting its unified intent. This phenomenon seems highly relevant to the U.S. and Chinese cases: China’s sprawling national security bureaucracy is less of a unified actor than many U.S. observers seem to assume, while Beijing interprets a range of U.S. actions (especially those by members of Congress) as more coordinated than they are.

Taken together, these sources of misperception point to important roles for Track 2 dialogues—but also highlight again the practical barriers to their success. Future dialogues could potentially be built partly on these themes, with a goal of encouraging discussion—and generating reports and findings—that could help mitigate some of these misperceptions. On the other hand, the very sources of mistrust themselves, particularly the tendency to hold on to existing views even in the face of contrary evidence, complicate the task of achieving changes in

⁴⁰ Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” p. 478.

⁴¹ Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” pp. 474, 477.

⁴² Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” p. 475.

views through such dialogues. At a minimum, this suggests that organizers will need patience and a commitment to continue efforts for years to test the potential to overcome strongly held biases.

The Potential for a Regular Coexistence

As a result of the trends outlined above, including the powerful sources of misunderstanding now plaguing the U.S.-China relationship, the space for cooperation of any kind has shrunk dramatically. Recent RAND analysis surveyed opportunities in a range of domains—geopolitical initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East as well as collaborating to mitigate threats to the global commons—and found that the United States, China, and Russia had overlapping interests on very few issues (notably North Korean denuclearization and preventing arms races) and that trust was generally declining, meaning that “the available trade space for cooperation is diminishing.”⁴³

As of this writing, in May-June 2023, the Biden administration has undertaken a significant diplomatic initiative to rekindle direct talks with China. The Biden administration has emphasized building a “floor for the relationship” and maintaining “common-sense guardrails” to prevent conflict and “to keep lines of communication open”⁴⁴ Perhaps one of the most significant of these efforts to maintain dialogue between the two countries was the extensive meeting held in Vienna between National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Chinese Politburo Member and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission Wang Yi. A spate of dialogues also included several lower-ranking officials on both sides. In June, Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated the importance of maintaining “open channels of communication across a full range of issues to reduce the risk of miscalculation” during his trip to China, where he met with President Xi Jinping, Wang Yi, and former State Councilor and Foreign Minister Qin Gang.⁴⁵

In the process, the parties discussed some initial concepts for future discussion. In a meeting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Bali in July 2022, for example, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi provided a “blueprint for their coexistence in Asia,” which according to one report consisted of support for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality, “uphold[ing] existing regional cooperation frameworks,” Respecting “each other’s legitimate

⁴³ Cohen, Raphael S., Elina Treyger, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Asha Clark, Kit Conn, Scott W. Harold, Michelle Gris , Marta Kepe, Soo Kim, Ashley L. Rhoades, Roby Valiaveedu, and Nathan Vest, *Vanishing Trade Space: Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in an Era of Competition — A Project Overview*, RAND Corporation, RR-A597-1, 2023, p. 97.

⁴⁴ Nandita Bose, Michael Martina, and David Brunnstrom, “Biden Seeks to Build ‘Floor’ for China Relations in Xi Meeting,” *Reuters*, November 10, 2022; “Readout of President Biden’s Virtual Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China,” The White House, November 16, 2021.

⁴⁵ “Secretary Blinken’s Visit to the People’s Republic of China (PRC),” U.S. Department of State, June 19, 2023.

rights and interests in the Asia Pacific,” and promoting “stability while providing ‘more public goods’ to the region.”⁴⁶

These dialogues are welcome developments. Leader-to-leader discussions can help stabilize the relationship and reduce the short-term temperature of the rivalry.⁴⁷ They are essential to developing any sort of shared vision of the relationship. If the effort to deepen dialogue lasts, it could open the door to more in-depth talks about what coexistence could look like—talks that could be informed by the results of Track 2 discussions designed to generate options and insights about that topic. Such deeper dialogue is essential, because the structural elements of the relationship seem set for a continued intensification of the rivalry, a broad trajectory against which bilateral dialogues will continue to struggle. And one leading spur to mistrust and hostility is the challenge identified in this research concept: The absence of any image of a future in which both the United States and China can fulfill their essential interests while coexisting.

As useful as they are, these dialogues are a necessary but not sufficient step toward achieving a more fundamental long-term equilibrium in the relationship. They have not so far shifted the fundamental trajectory. Policies continue to focus on urgent, short-term, often reactive priorities, leaving little room for the conception of a long-term vision. When either side does offer visions of the future—such as China’s recent Global Security Initiative or its recurring call for a new type or model of great power relations with the United States—they tend to be long on inspiring rhetoric and short on practical ideas for rationalizing the interests of the two sides.

A consistent underlying theme in the roster of factors promoting hostility is the sense of growing threats from the other side, and a future in which the rival is determined to pose a growing and perhaps even existential threat (however that vague term is defined) to each side’s interests. The lack of meaningful avenues to cooperation leaves both sides with no basis to define a peaceful future, one in which the vital interests of each side are respected. The current expectation is precisely the opposite: Each side views the other as determined to destroy any possibility of stable coexistence.

This summary of the trajectory of the U.S.-China relationship therefore supports the initial hypotheses of this research project: That the rivalry is headed into a highly dangerous and unstable period, and that one important and perhaps essential tool for shifting that trajectory would be the articulation of a coherent, well-defined vision of a world where both sides can meet their vital interests. Such a vision of a shared future that safeguards the essential interests of both sides is an indispensable precondition for stability.

⁴⁶ “China Lays Out Rules for Managing US Engagement in Asia Pacific,” *Bloomberg*, July 11, 2022.

⁴⁷ As Jessica Chen Weiss has argued, “Given the deep distrust on both sides, coordinated, unilateral steps back from the brink — voluntary bounds on behavior rather than limits on new capabilities — could give both the United States and China breathing room to get through acute domestic challenges and navigate a particularly perilous period.” Recent U.S. efforts fall into this category, which is a critical step toward a more stable future. Jessica Chen Weiss, “America and China Don’t Need to Knock Each Other Out to Win,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2022.

In a separate analysis, RAND studied the elements of stable great power competitions. The analysis examined dozens of variables associated with stability in such rivalries and identified two factors as the most essential requirements for stability. One is a sort of resilient equilibrium in which relations recover after shocks. The other, highly relevant to this discussion, is what we termed “mutual agreement to a shared status quo”:

This condition describes a situation in which both members of a rivalry implicitly or explicitly commit themselves to certain critical elements of a shared status quo that can provide a baseline for a stable relationship. Such elements can include the territorial integrity of each other and of states on each other’s periphery; respect for the norm of territorial nonaggression, except in extreme circumstances of self-defense; mutual acceptance of (formal or informal) limitations on the development and/or deployment of destabilizing capabilities; and foundational institutions of the Westphalian system, including the status of diplomats from the rival’s foreign service. ... If no such agreed status quo exists—if one or both members of a rivalry are revisionist regarding the existing situation—stability is, by definition, ruled out.⁴⁸

The foundation for such a mutual agreement must be a vision of a future in which such an enduring conception of a shared status quo is possible.

Our brief survey of the trajectory of U.S.-China relations therefore produces two essential findings. First, that trajectory—notwithstanding the efforts to ease tensions now underway—is headed in dangerous directions absent some forces that interrupt the current mutual mistrust and hostility. And second, a critical shortcoming in any effort to change this trajectory is the absence of a vision of a future in which the United States and China can coexist in ways that allow each to safeguard their vital interests. These findings broadly endorse the potential value of the initiative being assessed in this scoping project—a Track 2 initiative designed to sketch out the rudiments of a shared future of coexistence in which the United States and China can each realize their most vital interests.

⁴⁸ Mazarr, Charap, Casey, Chindea, Curriden, Demus, Frederick, Chan, Godges, Han, Heath, Ma, Treyger, Ulin, and Wyne, 2021, p. 15.

Chapter 3. The Status of Track 2 Dialogues

Over 40 years after the term “Track Two diplomacy” was coined by Joseph Montville and William Davidson, these dialogues have firmly established their place as a complement to official diplomatic efforts.⁴⁹ Dialogues in the Asia-Pacific region blossomed after the Cold War in the early 1990s.⁵⁰ China began participating in these dialogues in 1996-1997,⁵¹ and although regional Track 2 dialogues fell off during 1997-1998 due to the Asia Financial Crisis, these years continue to see an increase in China’s participation.

Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues have developed into many shapes and forms. Topics range from climate change to security issues and are established by organizations of diverse sizes with varying agendas.⁵² The objectives of Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues also vary, with some focused on relationship building and others intended to solve a specific policy challenge.⁵³

Track 1.5 dialogues convene a mix of government or military officials and non-government experts. These experts often include former government and military officials, NGO and think tank experts, as well as scholars.⁵⁴ Track 2 dialogues include only non-government experts. When coining the term, Montville defined this type of diplomacy as “unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aim to develop strategies, to influence public opinion, organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict.”⁵⁵

By nature, Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues between the United States and China have been incredibly diverse.⁵⁶ During our research and conversations with experts in the field, we

⁴⁹ Julia Palmiano Federer, “Toward A Normative Turn in Track Two Diplomacy? A Review of the Literature,” *Negotiation Journal*, Fall 2021, pp. 427-428.

⁵⁰ There was a sharp decrease in dialogues due to the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis. See Desmon Ball, Anthony Milner, and Brendan Taylor, “Track 2 Security Dialogue in the Asia-Pacific: Reflections and Future Directions,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2006, p. 176; Michael O. Wheeler, *Track 1.5/2 Security Dialogues with China: Nuclear Lessons Learned*, Institute for Defense Analysis (IDA), IDA Paper P-5135, September 2014, p. 5.

⁵¹ Experts Johnston and Evans argue this marked China’s attitude change and entry into multilateral institutions. See Alastair Iain Johnston and Paul Evans, “China’s Engagement with Multilateral Security Institutions,” *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power*, Routledge, 1999.

⁵² Wheeler, 2014, p. 5.

⁵³ Jennifer Staats, Ph.D., Johnny Walsh, and Rosarie Tucci, “A Primer on Multi-track Diplomacy: How Does it Work?” United States Institute of Peace, July 31, 2019.

⁵⁴ Joseph Montville, “Track Two Diplomacy: The Arrow and the Olive Branch,” V.D. Volkan M.D., J. Monville, & D.A. Julius, eds., *The Psychodynamics of International Relations: Unofficial Diplomacy at Work*, Vol. 2, Lexington Books, 1991, p. 162.

⁵⁵ Montville, 1991, p. 162.

⁵⁶ Ball, Milner, and Taylor, 2006, p. 176.

identified 30 current ongoing Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues between the United States and China, shown in Table 3.1. Of these, 33 percent are Track 1.5 dialogues and 67 percent are Track 2 dialogues.

Table 3.1. Existing U.S.-China Track 1.5 and Track 2 Dialogues

Dialogue Name	Organizer(s)	Issue Focus (if any)	Details
U.S.-China Strategic Policy Dialogue	George H.W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations	Security	A Track 2 dialogue between former diplomats and academics in the United States and China. Co-hosted by the Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding at Peking University.
U.S.-China High-Level Political Party Leaders Dialogue	George H.W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations	Security	A Track 1.5 dialogue featuring government officials from the United States, China, and leaders from the Bush China Foundation. Co-organized with the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC).
U.S.-China Track II Dialogue on Climate Finance	National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR) and Center on Global Energy Policy, Columbia University	Climate finance	An off-the-record Track 2 dialogue to collaborate on financing projects to mitigate and adapt to global climate change. Collaborated between NCUSCR, the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University, and the Beijing Green Finance Association. Under the guidance of the Institute of Energy, Environment and Economy at Tsinghua University.
U.S.-China Track II Dialogue on the Digital Economy	NCUSCR	Digital economics	A Track 2 dialogue between NCUSCR and the Guanchao Cyber Forum to discuss changes affecting businesses globally and possible paths of cooperation between U.S. and Chinese companies.
U.S.-China Track II Dialogue on Healthcare	NCUSCR	Health care	In partnership with the National School of Development at Peking University, this Track 2 dialogue on healthcare issues pertaining to both countries, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and healthcare cooperation.
U.S.-China Track II Dialogue on the Rule of Law & Human Rights	NCUSCR	Human rights	Established in 2019, this Track 2 dialogue gathers experts from U.S. and China's government, academia, and the legal field to discuss developments in law that affect human rights. Organized in collaboration with the China Foundation for Human Rights Development (CFHRD).
U.S.-China Track II Dialogue on Maritime Issues & International Law	NCUSCR	Maritime security	A bi-annual Track 2 that brings together legal experts from the United States and China to discuss maritime disputes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Co-sponsored by the National Institute for South China Sea Studies.
U.S.-China Track II Economic Dialogue	NCUSCR	Economy	A bi-annual Track 2 dialogue that brings together economists, economic thinkers, and business leaders from the U.S. and China.
U.S. China Track II Strategic Security Dialogue	NCUSCR and Stanford-Harvard Preventive Defense Project (PDP)	Security	An off-the-record, Track 2 dialogue that brings together military and political leaders from China and Taiwan.
U.S.-China High-Level Dialogue on	Aspen Institute	Climate change	Co-hosted with the Counselors Office of the State Council of China (COSC) and the WRI, this Track 2

Dialogue Name	Organizer(s)	Issue Focus (if any)	Details
Energy and Climate Change	and World Resources Institute (WRI)		dialogue brings together international experts to discuss U.S.-China collaboration on climate change.
U.S.-China CEO and Former Senior Officials' Dialogue	U.S. Chamber of Commerce (USCC)	Economics	USCC and the China Center for International Economic Exchanges (CCIEE) gather former government officials and experts in this Track 2 dialogue to discuss economic and commercial policy issues in U.S.-China relations.
Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD)	University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation	Security	An annual Track 1.5 dialogue with experts. Academics, and officials from China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. `The aim of NEACD is to reduce the risk of military conflict and lay groundwork for official multilateral processes in the region.
U.S.-China Dialogue on the Global Economic Order	Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)	Economics	A Track 1.5 dialogue on a wide array of economic issues. Co-organized by the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS).
China-West Dialogue	Global Solutions Initiative	International relations	This dialogue brings together leaders from China, Canada, Chile, Europe, the UK, Japan, Korea, and the United States to create greater dialogue and better relations in the international sphere.
China-U.S.-Asia Dialogue	Asia-Pacific Leadership Network	U.S.-China relations	A Track 2 dialogue that gathers leaders from China, the United States, and the Asia-Pacific to understand issues that lead to mistrust between the United States and China.
China-U.S. Dialogue on Strategic Nuclear Dynamics	Pacific Forum	Nuclear security	An annual off-the-record Track 1.5 dialogue in collaboration with the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies (CFISS), and the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) to discuss the strategic nuclear dimension of the U.S.-China relationship.
U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue	Pacific Forum and US Defense Threat Reduction Agency	U.S.-China relations	A Track 1.5 dialogue aimed to minimize mutual understanding and create steps towards bilateral cooperation between the United States and China.
China-United States Sustained Dialogue	Kettering Foundation	U.S.-China relations	Since 1985, the Kettering Foundation In cooperation with the Institute of American Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) has held regular dialogues to increase understanding between the two sides.
China and Globalization Forum	Center for China and Globalization	Globalization	This annual forum convenes experts from the U.S. and internationally to discuss China's globalization development. It is organized by the Center for China & Globalization but features guests from U.S. think tanks, academic institutions, private sector, and former government officials.
China-U.S.-Asia Dialogue	Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)	Security	This multilateral Track 2 dialogue brings together experts from the United States, China, the Asia Pacific to examine the growing gap between China and the United States.
U.S.-China Sanya Dialogue	Stimson Center	Military security	A military-to-military Track 2 dialogue, previously organized by the EastWest Institute, that convenes retired four-star generals and admirals to discuss military cooperation between the two countries.

Dialogue Name	Organizer(s)	Issue Focus (if any)	Details
CSCAP General Conference	Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP)	Security	CSCAP organizes an annual Track 2 conference with experts from the United States, China, and 19 other countries to discuss matters in the Asia Pacific.
The U.S.-China Regional Dialogue Series	U.S.-Asia Institute	Economics	This Track 1.5 dialogue convenes government officials, business leaders, experts, and community group representatives to discuss commerce and trade issues.
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	ASEAN	Security	Established by ASEAN in 1994, this multilateral Track 1.5 dialogue includes officials from China, the United States, and many other major powers and Asian countries.
U.S.-China Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence and International Security	Brookings Institution	Security	The Center for Strategy and Security Studies at Tsinghua University and Brookings Institution collaborate with international experts and scholars to discuss security issues surrounding artificial intelligence (AI).
Track II Dialogue on Outer Space Security	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Space security	This Track 2 dialogue is co-hosted with the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association to discuss China-US space communications and space security. ⁵⁷
U.S. China Track II Strategic Security Dialogue	National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP)	Security	An off-the-record, Track 2 dialogue that brings together military and political leaders from China and Taiwan.
Cross-Taiwan Strait Dialogue	NCAFP	Cross-strait relations	A Track 2 dialogue between scholars from the United States, China, and Taiwan to mitigate tensions in cross-Strait relations.
US-China Track II High-Level Exchange	US-China Transpacific Foundation (UCTPF)	U.S.-China relations	A Track 2 dialogue co-organized with the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs designed to nurture understanding and discussion of bilateral issues between the United States and China.
Various dialogues	The Georgetown Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues	U.S.-China relations	This Initiative is a platform for Track 2 dialogues. It brings together experts from the United States, China, and others to discuss five areas: peace and security, business and trade, climate change, global health and society and culture.

SOURCE: RAND analysis from data provided in conversations and research. This list represents a strongly representative sample, but it is not comprehensive.

^a China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, “Secretary-General Li Chijiang Participated in the China-US Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence and International Security” [李长江秘书长参加中美人工智能与国际安全对话], March 1, 2023.

Our conversations with experts and scholars produced references to a handful of additional dialogues for which there is no public-facing information.⁵⁸ There is even less public knowledge

⁵⁷ China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, “CACDA Held the China-US Track II Dialogue on Outer Space Security,” January 10, 2023.

⁵⁸ These include dialogues organized by the Center for American Progress (CAP), the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP), the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), the Asia

of how Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues are monitored, coordinated, or controlled by counterparts in China and the Chinese government.⁵⁹ Counterparts in China often come from universities, national institutions, and government think tanks. Examples include China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), Peking University, Tsinghua University, China Center for International Economic Exchanges (CCIEE), China Foundation for Human Rights Development (CFHRD), National Institute for South China Sea Studies (CISCSS), Beijing Green Finance Association, the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, the Counselors Office of the State Council, the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), and the PLA National Defense University (NDU), among others. We could find no information about the degree to which these are coordinated or mutually supporting on the Chinese side.

We also gathered data on the substantive focus of these dialogues, with the results depicted in Figure 3.1. Roughly half focused on U.S.-China security issues, including topics such as maritime security, cross-Strait relations, nuclear strategy, and military cooperation. The second most common focus was economics, including economic and commercial policy, commerce and trade, as well as business-to-business cooperation. A small number of the dialogues retained a very broad focus on U.S.-China relations writ large, to preserve flexibility in dealing with various topics depending on strategic interests and geopolitical trends during the time of the dialogue. Finally, there are a few specialized, public-facing dialogues that focus on topics of human rights, health, climate change, and globalization.

As U.S.-China relations deteriorated in 2017, so did many Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, after what some Track 2 organizers have described as an initial burst of interest at the outset of the Trump administration.⁶⁰ In the past few years, however, it seems that Beijing has developed a renewed interest in international relations.⁶¹ Zhang Tuosheng, expert and director of the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies’ Foreign Policy center, argued: “Track 2 Security Dialogue held by the think tanks of the two countries has played a positive role in carrying out security cooperation, managing differences and crises, reducing misunderstanding and misjudgment, and increasing mutual trust.” He then proceeded to say: “Track 2 security

Society, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, Yale Law School’s Paul Tsai Center, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), and New America.

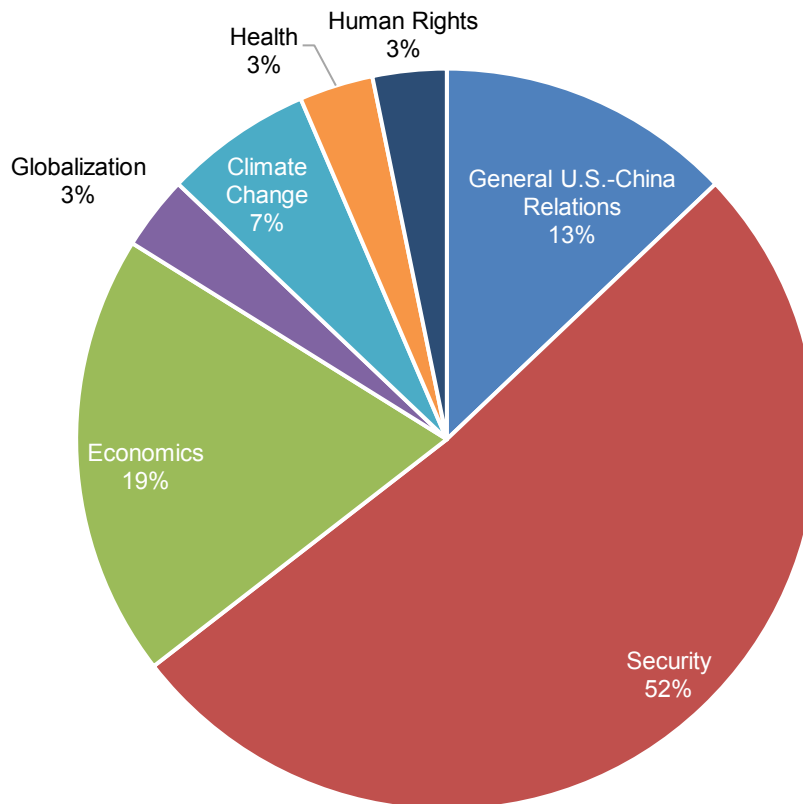
⁵⁹ Wheeler, 2014, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁰ Yao Yunzhu, “Taking Stock: The Past, Present, and the Future of U.S.-China Nuclear Dialogue,” in Brad Roberts, ed., *Taking Stock: U.S. China Track 1.5 Nuclear Dialogue*, Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Library, December 2020; comments by organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives, August 2023.

⁶¹ Wu Shicun [吴士存], “Feeling the Urgency of China-U.S. ‘Track II’ Dialogue in the United States” [在美国感受中美“二轨”对话的紧迫性], *Global Times* [环球时报], June 15, 2023.

dialogue should not be suspended, but should be further strengthened.”⁶² *Global Times*, which is considered the CCP’s mouthpiece,⁶³ editorialized in June of 2023 that “[E]xpanding ‘Track two’ exchanges is one of the most effective means to prevent further decline in China-US relations and maintain relative stability at this stage.”⁶⁴

Figure 3.1. Topics of Track 1.5 and Track 2 Dialogues



SOURCE: RAND analysis from data provided in conversations and research. This list represents a strongly representative sample, but it is not comprehensive.

This sense of renewed interest has been corroborated in conversations held with Track 1.5 and Track 2 experts. Although there was a push towards increased dialogues during the Trump administration, many also credit the renewed interest to the end of Coronavirus disease (COVID-

⁶² Zhang Tuosheng [张沅生], “Strengthening Crisis Management is the Primary task of China-US and China-Japan Security Relations” [“加强危机管理是当前中美、中日安全关系的首要任务”], Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University, January 6, 2022.

⁶³ Congressional-Executive Committee on China (CECC), “The Long Arm of China: Global Efforts to Silence Critics from Tiananmen to Today,” 114th Congress, Second Session, May 24, 2016.

⁶⁴ Wu, 2023.

19) restrictions and changing political motives.⁶⁵ Based on conversations conducted with those engaged in current or previous Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, many agree that there seems to be a push from their counterparts in China to renew and increase this form of diplomacy. Some view this as actually one long trend—a heightened interest in Track 2 efforts around 2016 interrupted by growing tensions and, most importantly, COVID-19 constraints and distrust of virtual meeting formats, and then renewed as Covid restrictions eased.⁶⁶ This push was augmented by Biden and Xi’s November 2022 meeting in Bali,⁶⁷ when both sides agreed to continue senior-level dialogues between the two nations and work together on shared transnational challenges.⁶⁸ This restoration of official dialogues was complemented by increased interest in Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues as well, with one expert describing there being a “pent-up demand.”⁶⁹

These findings endorse the central idea under consideration in this scoping exercise—a new Track 2 dialogue specifically oriented toward defining medium- to long-term futures of coexistence between the United States and China—in two ways. First, while many issue-specific Track 2 efforts have been underway and are now re-starting, none focuses on this central issue of precisely and specifically defining a shared future. Second, both sides have now recognized the perils of a trajectory of unrestrained hostility, and Washington and Beijing each have indicated a desire for ideas designed to moderate the temperature of the rivalry. In this sense, despite the high levels of mistrust in the overall relationship, such an initiative could be very timely, taking advantage of the mutual interest in tension reduction mechanisms but doing so in a way that transcends some of the current mistrust by hypothesizing medium-term future scenarios.

This analysis cannot make a definitive judgment about the potential value of an additional new Track 2 project scoped in these ways. Partly, too, its ultimate effect will be a product of the nature of the participants and the degree of public awareness it generates in both countries, factors that are partly within the control of the organizers. Our research does, however, support the conclusions in the previous paragraph: That current Track 2 efforts do not deeply and explicitly focus on long-term futures, and that the recognition of the need for efforts to mitigate hostility is clear. Below we offer an analysis of the qualities that tend to make for successful Track 2 initiatives, analysis which also suggests the potential for new approaches. Taken

⁶⁵ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives, March 2023; Scott Kennedy and Wang Jisi, “American and China Need to Talk,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 6, 2023; Wu, 2023.

⁶⁶ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives, March 2023.

⁶⁷ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives, March 2023.

⁶⁸ David Sacks, “What the Biden-Xi Meeting Means for U.S. China Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, November 15, 2022; “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China,” White House, November 14, 2022.

⁶⁹ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives, March 2023.

together, these conclusions do suggest that an extended Track 2 dialogue focused on long-term coexistence is worth the investment.

Chapter 4. Do Track 2 Dialogues Work? Anecdotal and Research Evidence

As part of the effort to assess the potential for a Track 2 initiative in the U.S.-China context, we sought out evidence on the effectiveness of historical Track 1.5 and Track 2 efforts, both to inform the earlier discussion of the criteria for more successful efforts and to assess the potential for meaningful change from a major new effort. We found that the existing literature, while highlighting specific criteria for more effective Track 1.5 and Track 2 efforts, does not offer the basis for a definitive assessment, either of the general value proposition of Track 1.5 and Track 2 activities or of the potential utility of a very significant, forward-looking U.S.-China engagement focused on long-term coexistence. This is true for two reasons: The limits to existing empirical research, and the fact that much of what has been done has focused more on classic conflict resolution applications of such dialogues rather than diplomacy in a great power rivalry. But one countervailing lesson is that, precisely because overarching judgments about Track 2 dialogues are not helpful, the potential value of a new initiative must be judged on its own terms—and the history suggests that, if new efforts meet key criteria, they have at least some chance of playing an essential role in a process of peacebuilding.

The Challenge of Measuring Success

Part of the challenge is that many of the benefits of Track 2 activities are indirect and long-term—socializing the participants into new understandings, generating ideas which can gradually gain traction and work their way into the policy bloodstream in both (or all) countries. Three scholars have summarized the challenges of assessment this way:

Beyond the handful of relatively unambiguous examples of “success” already referred to in this article – the contribution of the SCS Workshops to stability in the SCS region; the assistance provided by CSCAP [Council for Security and Cooperation in Asia] to the ARF [ASEAN Regional Forum] in its efforts to develop a working definition of preventive diplomacy; and the pivotal role played by ASEAN-ISIS [Institutes for Strategic and International Studies] in the establishment of the ARF itself – demonstrating unequivocally the “influence” and “effectiveness” of Track 2 security dialogue is a notoriously difficult exercise.⁷⁰

Track 2 dialogues are employed in significantly different contexts, and this creates challenges for evaluation. Some Track 2 efforts are more technocratic in nature, aiming to

⁷⁰ Desmond Ball, Anthony Milner and Brendan Taylor, “Track 2 Security Dialogue in the Asia-Pacific: Reflections and Future Directions,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2006, pp. 174-188.

generate agreement among specialists on objectively-validated paths forward.⁷¹ In some cases, the effort is designed to generate dialogue among representative groups of people in conflict-prone nations or regions, as a way of using the dialogue process itself to achieve changed perspectives among the participants.⁷² Some of these uses of Track 2 processes relate more to the field of conflict resolution than international security affairs; in some cases, the specific techniques rely on the role of nongovernmental leaders of Track 2 processes playing a formal mediator role in conflict. A relatively small number of studies have attempted to empirically assess the effects of such processes on perceptions and openness to peace.⁷³

This complexity also produces the risk of a conceptual muddle. As one survey concluded, “the Track Two concept is increasingly used in multiple ways and in different contexts, risking uncoordinated planning and interventions, especially in contexts that feature multi-track initiatives and multi-party mediation.”⁷⁴

Partly for these reasons, there remains limited empirical basis to make judgments about the general effectiveness of Track 2 efforts. As a result, some participants in Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, as well as scholars who have studied their outcomes, have highlighted several challenges with the approach and expressed some degree of skepticism about their utility. One common critique is that the overall set of dialogues is inconsistent in degrees of transparency, the period and length of convening, as well as their best practices.⁷⁵ As there is no coordinating body between the various dialogues, there are few extensive records of Track 1.5 and Track 2

⁷¹ This has been true of some health care uses of the technique. Aleem Bharwani, Julia Palmiano Federer, and Jack Latour, “Healing Dialogue: Can the Techniques and Practices of Track Two Diplomacy Play A Role In Resolving Public Health Conflicts?” *International Journal*, Vol. 77, No. 2, 2022, pp. 313–334.

⁷² This is primarily the focus of Ronald Fisher, Margarita Tadevosyan, and Esra Cuhadar, “Track 2 Dialogues,” United States Institute of Peace, April 23, 2023.

⁷³ Some representative examples of research that discusses the theory of change embodied in these efforts as well as some empirical results are Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia*, RAND Corporation, MG-592-NSRD, 2007, pp. 1-30; Peter Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, Stanford University Press, 2015; Peter Jones, “Filling a Critical Gap, or Just Wasting Time? Track Two Diplomacy and Regional Security in the Middle East,” *Disarmament Forum*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), Iss. 2, July 2008; Shai Feldman, Zeev Schiff, and Hussein Agha, *Track-II Diplomacy: Lessons from the Middle East*, MIT Press, 2004; Noha Aboueldahab, “Track II Diplomacy: How Can It Be More Effective?” Middle East Council on Global Affairs, Issue Brief, September 27, 2022; Tamra Pearson D’Estrée, Larissa A. Fast, Joshua N. Weiss, and Monica S. Jakobsen, “Changing the Debate about ‘Success’ in Conflict Resolution Efforts,” *Negotiation Journal*, Iss. 17, No. 2, July 2007, pp. 101–13; Jay Rothman, “Dialogue in Conflict: Past and Future,” in *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, Eugene Weiner ed., Continuum, 1998, pp. 217–35; Esra Cuhadar, “Assessing Transfer from Track Two Diplomacy: The Cases of Water and Jerusalem,” *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 46, No. 5, September 2009, pp. 641–58; Deepak Malhotra and Sumanasiri Liyanage, “Long-Term Effects of Peace Workshops in Protracted Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 6, 2005, pp. 908–924.

⁷⁴ Julia Palmiano Federer, “Is There a New Track Two? Taking Stock of Unofficial Diplomacy and Peacemaking,” Ottawa Dialogue, Policy Brief No.1, February 2021.

⁷⁵ Wheeler, 2014, pp. 5-6.

dialogues, or efforts to share experiences or ideas to improve effectiveness.⁷⁶ The last known consistent tracker of Asia-Pacific Track 2 dialogues was the Dialogue and Research Monitor (DRM), which was funded by the Ford Foundation Funding and later the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) but became defunct in 2008.⁷⁷ Over the years, there were other efforts to catalogue Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, but we could discover no current effort to generate such an over-arching view of the efforts.⁷⁸

Another criticism, particularly of Track 2, is its limited ability to influence foreign policy. Current government officials do not participate in this form of diplomacy, so participants lack political power to directly influence policy, especially at the war stage of conflict.⁷⁹ Some Track 2 dialogues, according to our discussions with participants, tend to involve two sides sharing perspectives more than a practical development of shared norms or agreement to common policy ideas.⁸⁰ Another expert also noted that dialogues involve more problem diagnosis as opposed to problem solving.⁸¹ Track 2 dialogues may therefore have less inherent capacity to influence change compared to Track 1 or Track 1.5 dialogues.⁸²

Evidence for Potential Value

However, the available literature does provide a basis for the claim that, at the right times and in the right contexts, Track 2 dialogues can be part of a set of factors that produce positive results in international relationships. That literature also highlights some of the factors that tend to differentiate successful from failed initiatives. One clear lesson from the available literature is that expectations for the effects of Track 2 dialogues must be kept in check: They cannot transform a bilateral relationship on their own. But they can still serve as useful components of larger processes that work toward that goal.

First, the literature highlights several classic cases in which some form of Track 2 dialogue played an important role in peacebuilding. Specific examples of success stories commonly include Cold War U.S.-Soviet dialogues on strategic stability (the “Dartmouth dialogues”), the Track 2 process that helped lay the foundations for the 1993 Oslo Accords, discussions between U.S. and North Korean scholars and officials that provided some of the basis for the 2018 U.S.-

⁷⁶ Brian L. Job, “Track 2 Diplomacy: Ideational Contribution to the Evolving Asian Security Order (2003),” in *Assessing Track 2 Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region: A CSCAP Reader*, Desmond Ball and Kwa Chong Guan, eds., Strategic & Defence Studies Centre and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010, p. 139.

⁷⁷ Wheeler, 2014, p. 6.

⁷⁸ Ball, Milner, and Taylor, 2006, p. 178.

⁷⁹ Jeffrey Mapendere, “Track One and A Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks,” *Culture of Peace Online Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2000, pp. 68-69.

⁸⁰ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives, February 2023.

⁸¹ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives, February 2023.

⁸² Mapendere, 2000, pp. 68-69.

North Korea summit, and a long series of Track 2 dialogues in South Asia that helped in various ways to moderate the India-Pakistan competition and stabilize the relationship. Some also cite the “ping pong diplomacy” that preceded the breakthrough in Sino-U.S. relations in the 1970s as an example of how informal contacts can create precedents that make it easier for policymakers to make important leaps toward peace.

In these cases, the dialogues served multiple purposes and had various effects, which helped researchers to identify a set of common possible outcomes from Track 2 efforts. They promoted mutual understanding among experts with influence in their home countries, helping to surmount caricatured views of an enemy or rival. More fundamentally, in some cases, especially in dialogues that stretched for many years, they showed the potential to socialize participants into new conceptions of the relationships involved. In the process, some of these examples created specialist communities in the participating countries with growing expertise in the issues under discussion, personal stake in stabilized relations, and an incentive to influence policy.

These Track 2 efforts also produced specific ideas that could help break policy logjams, and broader visions of futures of coexistence that helped establish a long-term goal for diplomacy. They did this in an informal setting that allowed participants to suggest unusual ideas, or governments to quietly float trial balloons, without the political stakes of a formal negotiation. In some cases, they brought government officials directly into the discussions and thus connected the proceedings directly to the policy context.

There are examples of themes developed in these Track 2 settings being taken up by governments, or at least generating wider discussion that influences the overall context for policy making. Yet one question is whether the process of bringing together American and Chinese interlocutors in formal Track 2 efforts has unique value in this regard, or whether the same outcomes could be achieved by rigorous but independent policy research efforts. Arguably it is the interaction or marriage of strong research with Track 2 connections that has the potential to achieve the best outcomes.

Our research suggests that Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues have and continue to play an important role in U.S.-China security relations in particular, reflecting some of these potential opportunities. Some U.S.-China dialogues have extended over a long period of time and generated deep personal relationships, for example, as well as a degree of trust and openness. David Santoro and Robert Grommoll, regular participants of a biannual Pacific Forum Track 1.5 dialogue note that “Discussions with the Chinese, once the participants became familiar with each other, were usually frank and candid.” They note, however, that this level of comfort took three to five years of regular biannual meetings to achieve.

Track 2 dialogues in the U.S.-China context have helped to bridge gaps between formal diplomatic discussions and to maintain communications between the two countries even in times of government tensions. This holds true in modern day: Santoro and Grommell reflect that Pacific Forum’s Track 1.5 “China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue” was regular and continuous despite tensions in the U.S.-China relationship. Santoro writes: “Occasionally, in

particular during the time of US arms sales to Taiwan, the atmosphere was more tense, but it never impeded substantive work.”

Track 2 dialogues also allow for discussion of more varied and/or sensitive topics, as participants are less inhibited by political power and can express their viewpoints more freely. If these dialogues are regular with similar participants, participants are able to build relationships and common understandings and to explain their perspectives on issues. Track 1.5 dialogues allow officials to discuss more sensitive issues in a private and unofficial manner. Jennifer Staats, director of East Asia and Pacific Programs at the U.S. Institute of Peace notes: “These closed-door discussions help policymakers better understand the motivations and interests of the other actors and get a clearer sense of how their policy initiatives are perceived by their foreign counterparts.”⁸³ Staats also adds that track 1.5 dialogues allow leaders to share “trial balloon” policy ideas for feedback before officially implementing them.

The Record of Analogous Efforts

As noted above, many Track 2 efforts have focused on internal conflict rather than international rivalries. One set of efforts that represents a closer match to the U.S.-China case is Track 2 activities in the Middle East, where the goal was (at least in part) to generate ideas that could be ported over to the policy side and provide the basis for lasting settlements. The literature on these efforts is mixed in its assessment of their outcomes, but as noted above it does highlight specific efforts that bore important fruit.⁸⁴

South Asia has been the host or focus of dozens of Track 2 initiatives. Some have aimed at stabilizing the India-Pakistan relationship, some have focused on arms control and nonproliferation, and some have involved bilateral U.S.-India dialogues about the future of the relationship.⁸⁵ Assessments of this range of efforts suggest that Track 2 dialogues have achieved important results in some cases: Socializing a generation of Indian and Pakistani scholars and officials in the security interests of the other side, for example, and laying the groundwork for a long-term strengthening of the U.S.-India relationship by offering specific policy suggestions and by creating communities of experts on both sides with personal ties and a desire to encourage better relations.⁸⁶

⁸³ Jennifer Staats, “A Primer on Multi-Track Diplomacy: How Does it Work?” United States Institute of Peace, July 31, 2019.

⁸⁴ For examples of the role Track 2 dialogues played in several dispute resolution processes including Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Israel-Egypt, and Iran, see Nate Allen et al., “Bridging Divides: Track II Diplomacy in The Middle East,” Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 2013. See also Shai Feldman, Zeev Schiff, and Hussein Agha, *Track-II Diplomacy: Lessons from the Middle East*, MIT Press, 2003.

⁸⁵ Bhabani Mishra, “Post-1998 Track II Diplomacy Between India and the USA: An Indian Perspective,” *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 28, No. 1, January-March 2004.

⁸⁶ Mishra, 2004.

Other internationally oriented Track 2 efforts have been undertaken specifically in a U.S.-China context, or somewhat more broadly in an Asia-Pacific one.⁸⁷ From a regional standpoint, initiatives such as the long-standing Council for Security and Cooperation in Asia (CSCAP),⁸⁸ have brought together scholars, officials, and other representatives of regional countries for discussions of issues of common concern. Within the ASEAN context, some argue that a series of overlapping Track 2 efforts have been instrumental in promoting a gradual improvement of regional understanding and, within limits, creating the basis for joint ASEAN positions.⁸⁹

In U.S.-China relations, an important example has been the Track 1.5 dialogue on nuclear issues. This has been one of the more prominent ongoing Track 1.5 and Track 2 processes in the U.S.-China relationship, and there is a small but thoughtful literature assessing its outcomes.⁹⁰ A primary lesson from that experience is that dialogues can produce many forms of success, and partial victories can be important. One participant in the dialogues has argued that the dialogues produced many important positive outcomes: Mutual learning about approaches to arms control, identifying and countering misperceptions, finding some limited common ground, and developing a bi-national community of interest, among others. The dialogues did not produce a comprehensive vision of a bilateral arms control regime and had limited effect on Track 1 discussions, but they had enough identifiable effect to have been counted as a success.⁹¹

U.S.-China Track 2 dialogues have also been very active in health care, and these have indicated some promise for positive results. One Track 2 dialogue operating since 2017 and organized by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations and the National School of Development at Peking University has promoted “collaboration between healthcare professionals from both nations and leading to advancements in healthcare research and treatment. This initiative has demonstrated the potential of Track 2 diplomacy to foster tangible outcomes in areas of mutual interest.”⁹²

⁸⁷ Desmond Ball and Kwa Chong Guan, *Assessing Track 2 Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region: A CSCAP Reader*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010.

⁸⁸ See “Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific,” Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, webpage, undated.

⁸⁹ Mely Caballero-Anthony, “ASEAN’s Track Two Diplomacy: Reconstructing Regional Mechanisms of Conflict Management,” in *Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN Way*, ISEAS Publishing, 2005, pp. 157-193.

⁹⁰ See for example Wheeler, 2014.

⁹¹ Brad Roberts, “A Review and Assessment from an American Perspective,” in Roberts, ed., *Taking Stock: U.S.-China Track 1.5 Nuclear Dialogue*, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Center for Global Security Research, December 2020, pp. 30-32.

⁹² Brian Wong and Margaret Siu, “On the Role of Track II Diplomacy In Sino-West Relations,” *Unravel*, May 16, 2023.

Sources of Success

The history of Track 2 dialogues, and the limited number of studies which have sought to address their effectiveness, therefore suggests two conclusions. First, it is difficult as a rule to assess the outcomes of such efforts, in part because by design their effects will be indirect and long-term. Second, it is possible to identify cases in which one or a set of Track 2 dialogues played a useful role in a larger process of improving relations and stability in bilateral or multilateral relationships. The available studies and the discussions we held with sponsors of Track 2 dialogues do not allow a more definitive judgment than that. The evidence does support the possibility that the right Track 2 dialogue, on the right issue or relationship, at the right time, can work with other factors to promote a more peaceful or stable outcome.

The question then becomes what distinguishes successful from failed efforts—what are the criteria for effective Track 2 dialogues? The following section takes up this theme in detail, drawing on the literature on Track 2 efforts and on discussions with scholars who have recently organized U.S.-China Track 2 programs. This review of the literature suggests two important themes for conceptualizing the success and failure of Track 2 dialogues, and the potential for a long-term effort focused on defining a world of coexistence between the United States and China. The first theme relates to the general model for impact of Track 2 dialogues. Dalia Kaye has suggested a three-part model for achieving influence from dialogues:⁹³

- socialization of the participating elites
- “filtering” of externally generated policy ideas to the local environment
- transmission to official policy

Each of these phases or components of Track 2 processes has value, and progress in any one of them can count as success. Eventual uptake of ideas from a Track 2 process by the policy apparatus on both sides is the gold standard of impact, but it is not the only measure, and it often happens gradually. Multiple cases suggest the important value of the first two parts of Kaye’s model—socialization of an epistemic community of experts around the peace- and stability-promoting elements of the discussion, and publishing and promoting wider discussion of specific ideas and opportunities. In this sense, Kaye argues:

track two dialogues on regional security are not as much about producing high-profile official diplomatic breakthroughs as they are about socializing an influential group of security elites to think in more cooperative ways. They are less about humanizing the enemy—as important as this may be—than about demonstrating that security cooperation with an adversary (or indeed even with friendly regional neighbors) can reinforce, rather than undermine, national security interests.

She adds, “A narrow focus on policy change would miss the crux of what track two dialogues are about—changing the regional psychology regarding long-standing security

⁹³ Kaye, 2007, p. 21.

positions and creating a vast network of influential policy elites who are more receptive to ideas supportive of cooperative security and dialogue.”⁹⁴ A potential U.S.-China dialogue on a future of coexistence, then, could achieve much by “changing the psychology” around the long-term potential for peaceful relations.

A second theme raised by the literature on Track 2 dialogues is the question of ripeness. Studies of earlier efforts suggest that change—in the general psychology, quality, or stability in a bilateral relationship—happens when a critical mass of ideas and shifting perceptions meets a moment where policymakers have an appetite for change. Track 2 initiatives cannot manufacture such a moment. But they can build a set of experts in both countries with well-established relationships and experience addressing thorny issues, and specific ideas for enhancing relations when the moment is right. In this sense dialogues like Track 2 efforts are not a sufficient foundation for a transformed relationship—but they can be a necessary one.

These findings on the potential effectiveness and impact of Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues do not prove that the effort under consideration here, a dialogue to develop a road map to a shared future of coexistence, would have significant effects on the larger relationship or direct policy impact. They do at least raise the possibility of such outcomes, however. Several major Track 1.5 and Track 2 initiatives in the past, including several in the U.S.-China relationship, have had just such wider effects. Some of the criteria for successful outcomes, including the potential for socializing elites, pushing policy ideas into the broader debate, direct policymaker ties, and ripeness, can all be met in the case of such a new initiative. This is especially likely to be true if the effort is designed with the lessons of past dialogues in mind, a subject assessed in the next section.

⁹⁴ Kaye, 2007, pp. 105-106.

Chapter 5. Five Pillars for Designing Track 2 Initiatives: Lessons from Experience

Initial findings from this scoping effort suggest that how organizers design Track 2 dialogues—their structure, rules of engagement, choice of participants and other design elements—plays a major role in determining their success, whether the goal is to build epistemic communities of experts or to generate and transmit policy suggestions to influence the Track 1 process. We categorized the main themes that emerged for organizing Track 2 dialogues into five pillars, depicted in Figure 5.1: people, content, design, adaptation, and impact. These pillars represent focus areas for future organizers to consider as they design Track 2 dialogues between the U.S. and China and possibly between other countries, as our research covered Track 2 efforts that extended beyond the U.S.-China relationship. Below we discuss each of the pillars and some of the best practices suggested by our research for each of them.

People

People are the defining element of Track 2 dialogues. Our research found that successful Track 2 dialogues require getting the right people in the room and being conscious of their needs, making them comfortable, helping them trust the process, and making them willing to share honest views. The following sections discuss how to accomplish these tasks.

Including Individuals Connected to Policymakers and Experts

Dialogues with organizers and participants of Track 2 dialogues indicated that such initiatives work best when they represent a mix of people who have connections to policy makers and who have the appropriate technical knowledge to address the issue at hand. Sometimes one individual can be both well-connected and the expert on the topic. At other times, there may be a combination of well-connected individuals with interest in the topic and experts. As one scholar put it, “you need big shots with good intentions *and* experts on the topics.”⁹⁵ Including people with connections to influential policymakers is important for transferring ideas from the Track 2 process to Track 1; otherwise, the Track 2 simply becomes an “academic pursuit.”⁹⁶

Of note, getting well-connected participants involved and sustaining their involvement over time often represents a challenge for Track 2 dialogues. Some participants may overstate their

⁹⁵ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023.

⁹⁶ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 7, March 2023.

connectedness to the policy process.⁹⁷ In arranging Track 2 dialogues with China in particular, organizers often do not always fully understand which people are truly connected to Xi Jinping’s decisionmaking process and do not have much control over who ultimately shows up to the dialogue.⁹⁸ Organizers of future U.S.-China Track 2 dialogues may need to invest more resources into addressing this challenge if the intention is to have impact on broader policy. This may include mapping out the influential individuals on specific policy issues in China, investigating their connections to high-level leaders, cultivating relationships with these individuals to gain their trust, learning what it would take to get them to participate in dialogues, and evaluating the feasibility of meeting their requirements for participation.

Representing Relevant Stakeholders and Policy Positions

Our research suggests that successful Track 2 ventures reflect a diverse mix of relevant stakeholders and policy positions on each side to address the issue at hand.⁹⁹ In the past, U.S.-China Track 2 dialogues have sometimes been organized on a bilateral, institution-to-institution basis, but this type of engagement fails to bring all sides and stakeholders of issues together, which is not conducive for building a shared vision for coexistence on issues that transcend individual institutions. One expert we spoke to went as far as to say that these types of institution-to-institution Track 2 dialogues should be completely done away with in favor of more flexible structures that include participants from a range of organizations and with a range of views on the focus issue.¹⁰⁰

Balancing Group Dynamics Across Expertise, Roles, Ranks, Gender, Age, and Race

Our research also suggests that Track 2 organizers will benefit from balancing group dynamics within and across both sides, considering the appropriate balance of expertise, roles, ranks, age, gender, and race on each side. One expert offered an example of a hypothetical Track 2 on Middle East peace: A group with experts on Yemen on one side and experts on Syria on the other will be suboptimal because the differing focus, background, and expertise of the two expert communities mean that they will not be able to communicate easily.¹⁰¹ The same barriers can emerge if opposite sides in a Track 2 are composed of relatively homogenous groups from different backgrounds—scholars on one side and retired generals on the other, for example. It is critical to have experts from similar disciplines, communities, and backgrounds on each side as a

⁹⁷ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

⁹⁸ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 4, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 6, March 2023.

⁹⁹ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 6, March 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 6, March 2023.

¹⁰¹ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

way of breaking down barriers. Rank also must be considered: one scholar recounted how counterparts from China “will never accept a lower-ranking interlocutor compared with who they bring to the table.”¹⁰²

Gender, race, and age can sometimes be difficult for Track 2 dialogues to manage within and across both sides. One scholar recounted a story in which there was only one woman between the two sides of a dialogue, making her feel uncomfortable. It can be difficult to balance gender and race when the networks of influential people on policy are not always diverse.¹⁰³

Choosing Participants with Good Temperament

Dialogues with organizers and participants also highlighted a critical if highly qualitative and indeed subjective lesson. It is extremely important to choose participants with the right temperament for Track 2 dialogues, which means that people must be capable of handling debate and criticism without being “belligerent and insulting.”¹⁰⁴ Participants should not have inflated egos and should not be “paranoid or suspicious.”¹⁰⁵ Having the right temperament is so important that one organizer stated that it overrides well-connectedness, recounting a time when a well-connected but “egotistical” individual had to be excluded from a Track 2 after making a “disaster” of the one of the dialogue iterations.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023.

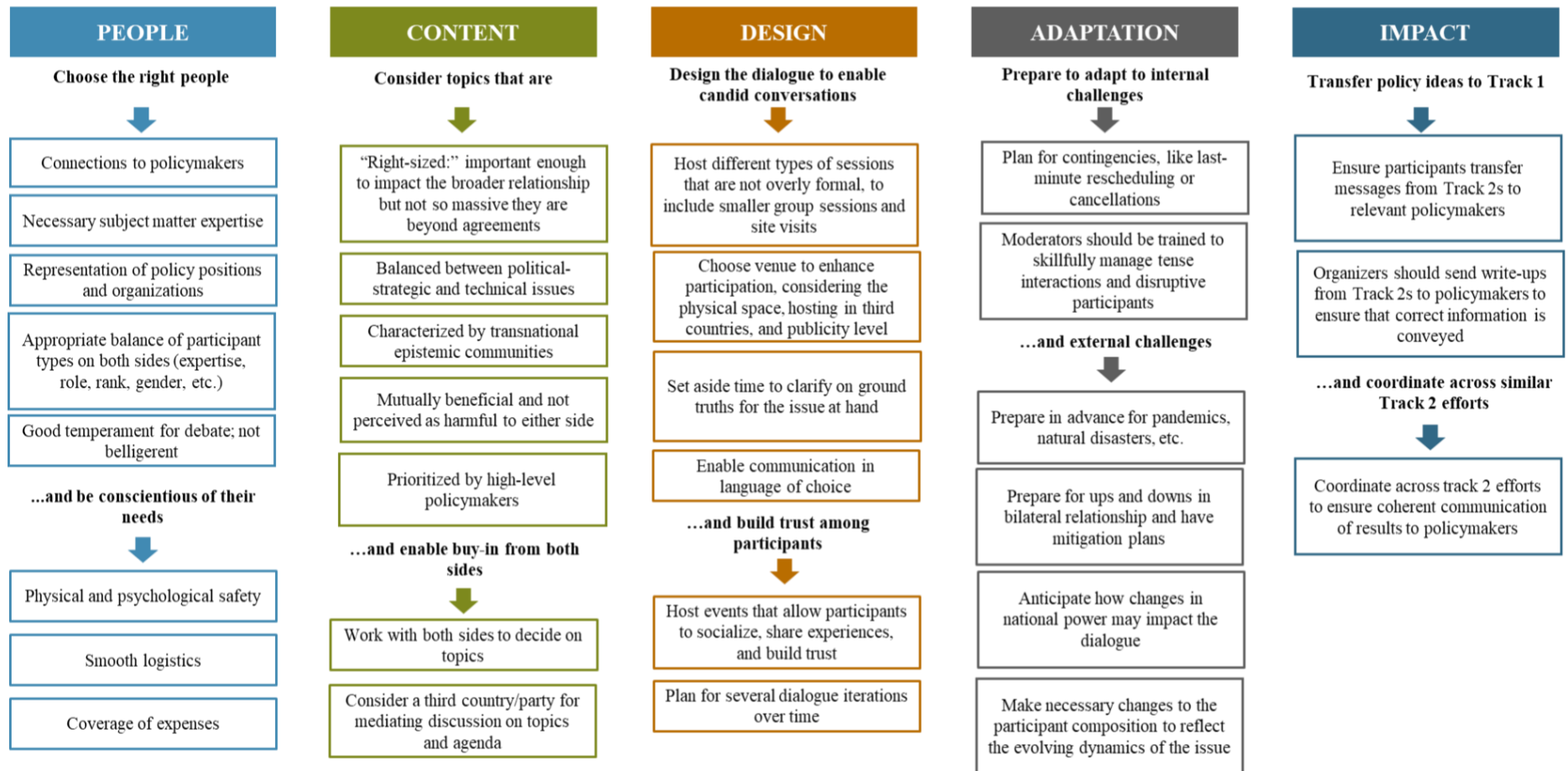
¹⁰³ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5; March 2023.

Figure 5.1 Five Pillars for Successful Track 2 Dialogues for U.S.-China Relations (and Beyond)



SOURCE: Based on research conducted by RAND authors and input from Abdulla Ibrahim. Thanks to Rorry Daniels for a review of an earlier version of this figure.

Being Conscious of Participant Needs

Once Track 2 organizers have selected the right people and the right balance of people to participate in a dialogue, they need to maintain those individuals' participation through being conscientious about their needs. Ensuring physical safety and psychological safety is important for all parties involved. Psychological safety is a shared belief among a group of people that risk-taking, expressing views, asking questions, and admitting mistakes will not be met with negative consequences.¹⁰⁷ According to one participant, psychological safety is “especially important for Russian and Chinese counterparts.”¹⁰⁸ Organizers also must ensure smooth logistics and be sensitive to the needs of participants because if the logistics are not made easy, it will be hard to convince some of the participants to attend.¹⁰⁹ For example, organizers should consider the ease of access to meeting locations, such as booking and covering the costs of direct flights for the participants. They should also be attentive to all expenditures and distances involved in traveling – sometimes what may seem like small expenses, such as the costs of transit between home and the airport, can matter for participation.¹¹⁰

Content

One of the most interesting judgments to be made about Track 2 dialogues is the choice of subject area(s) for discussion. Picking the wrong subject can torpedo an initiative from the beginning: For obvious reasons, putting human rights issues in China at the center of a proposed Track 2 effort would not be productive.¹¹¹ But our research uncovered different views about the optimal topics for successful Track 2 processes. Some organizers favor discussing more technical and relatively less controversial topics¹¹² while others seek to “hug the cactus on the new cold war,” emphasizing the need for dialogues on the most contentious and difficult topics in the relationship.¹¹³

Another challenge in choosing topics for discussion is that even when organizers pick a less contentious topic, they often cannot escape the overall climate of the broader bilateral

¹⁰⁷ Definition adapted from Amy Gallo. Amy Gallo, “What Is Psychological Safety,” *Harvard Business Review*, February 15, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹¹⁰ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹¹¹ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 2, February 2023.

¹¹² Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 2, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 3, February 2023

¹¹³ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 2, February 2023

relationship, especially because, as some noted, Chinese counterparts tend to link issues and are less inclined to separate out individual subjects from the tenor of the larger bilateral relationship.¹¹⁴ For example, one scholar recalled a representative from a think tank in China asserting that “Beijing doesn’t have the mood to cooperate with the U.S.” on “practical issues” until the U.S. offers more reassurance on Taiwan.¹¹⁵ Chinese participants sometimes try to set principles to guide the relationship before tackling individual topics—but Americans have often met this approach with hesitation, instead favoring to focus on specific topics.¹¹⁶

With these challenges in mind and based on our research, we suggest that organizers consider the criteria outlined below when choosing a Track 2 dialogue topic to ensure that it is conducive for discussion. Track 2 dialogues topics should be:

- “Right-sized”: Issues should be important enough so that mutual agreements would have an echo effect on the larger relationship, but not so massive that they are beyond meaningful agreements and discussions about shared values and norms.
- Balanced between issues with strongly political-strategic and more narrowly technical character: As noted above, Chinese officials and participants tend to emphasize the need to discuss and resolve general principles and disputes as the precondition for more technical, issue-specific efforts. U.S. officials and experts tend to want to move quickly to the narrower, more technical issues as the route to building limited agreements. This top-down versus bottom-up disparity in conceptualizing the value of Track 2 efforts must be managed in any new initiative. A long-term focus could help mitigate this challenge by taking both the principled disagreements and the technical issues out of the context of current assumptions.
- Characterized by epistemic communities: It is beneficial if topics of discussion are already characterized by epistemic communities in each country that have a history of collaborative work and participation in bilateral or multilateral rule-, norm-, or standard-setting processes. If epistemic communities do not already exist or need to be strengthened for a certain issue, track 2 organizers may consider which issues lend themselves to building those communities.
- Mutually beneficial and not harmful to either party: Topics chosen for Track 2 dialogues should provide a mutual benefit to both countries; the topics should not hurt or be perceived as hurtful or embarrassing to the US or China.¹¹⁷
- Prioritized by high-level policymakers: Topics need to be prioritized by high-level, credible people in each country’s governing system in order to have impact.

¹¹⁴ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 2, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 8, February 2023.

¹¹⁵ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 8, February 2023.

¹¹⁶ David Finkelstein, *The Military Dimensions of US-China Security Cooperation: Retrospective and Future Prospects*, Center for Naval Analysis (CNA), September 2010, pp. 24-25; Amanda Kerrigan, “Views from the People’s Republic of China on US-China Relations since the Beginning of the Biden Administration,” CNA, September 2021.

¹¹⁷ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023.

After topics are chosen, moderators need to ensure that both parties provide feedback and agree to the discussion agenda.¹¹⁸ Sometimes having a third party facilitate this process can be useful to avoid one side being seen as dominating the agenda over the other.¹¹⁹

Design

Design refers to the ways in which the Track 2 dialogues are held, including the overall structure of a dialogue, the venue where it is held, and the methods for communication and approaching the dialogue topics. Event design is often not the focus of literature on Track 2 dialogues, so we sought this information from discussions with scholars and experts and from literature on event design.

Structure: A Mix of Substantive and Fun Activities, Large Groups and Small Groups

Our research suggests that Track 2 dialogues will have a higher chance of success when they include a mix of substantive discussions on the issues at hand and informal events that allow participants to build relationships. These relationship-building activities can include joint sessions with all participants involved, smaller breakout sessions, field trips, and shared meals. In substantive sessions, organizers of past U.S.-China Track 2 dialogues advised to keep the sessions conversational and less formal, with one organizer emphasizing that there should not be any opening statements and delivery of talking points.¹²⁰ Several organizers mentioned smaller group breakout sessions as especially useful in getting the Chinese to speak more freely and fostered a more inviting atmosphere for engagement and discussion of the sides' motives and moves.¹²¹

Scholars and experts we spoke to consistently emphasized the importance of informal events to build trust and relationships between the two sides. These types of events include shared meals that enable side conversations, field trips that enable participants to learn about and discuss an issue, or a fun activity that creates a shared experience for participants.¹²² Some events can be

¹¹⁸ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 4, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹¹⁹ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹²⁰ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 4, 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 6, March 2023. One example of a format provided was six to eight sessions in a dialogue iteration, with one American and one Chinese presenter on a particular issue and then a subsequent group discussion; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 4, 2023.

¹²¹ David Santoro and Robert Gromoll, "On the Value of Nuclear Dialogue with China: A Review and Assessment of the Track 1.5 'China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue,'" *Issues and Insights*, Vol. 20, No. 1, November 2020, p. 3.

¹²² Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 3, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 9, April 2023.

designed to create empathy through exposure to an emotionally resonant activity: One U.S. scholar described a visit with a Chinese delegation to a women’s prison in the United States, for example, that caused both sides to speak openly about issues of criminal justice in their societies.¹²³ Others can build connections through simple fun: Another scholar recounted taking Track 2 participants involved in a tense issue to make chocolate together, which had a disarming effect on the participants, helping them ease into the dialogue.¹²⁴

Trust is undeniably important in building relationships. As former Secretary of State George Shultz emphasized, trust is the “coin of the realm.” He observed over the course of his career that when trust was in the room, “good things happened,” and when it was absent, “good things did not happen.”¹²⁵ Yet organizers and advocates of Track 2 dialogues cannot expect trust automatically to emerge from such events. As Wang Jisi and Kenneth Lieberthal pointed out over a decade ago, despite the many engagements that were happening between the United States and China, “the history of extensive activities have not, however, produced trust regarding long-term intentions on either side.”¹²⁶ Trust-building activities and processes must be mindfully integrated into the design of the dialogues.

At the same time, it is important to have realistic expectations about the type of trust that dialogues can build. Writings on trust outside the field of U.S.-China relations highlight that “trust is not all or nothing.”¹²⁷ One scholar with experience in U.S.-China Track 2 dialogues echoed this point, stating that there are “different forms” of trust, even something as simple as trust that both sides have fundamental interests they will be required to pursue.¹²⁸ The importance of trust also highlights the importance of patience, and supporting initiatives that continue for some time. Track 2 dialogues, especially if they are about working towards establishing norms for a shared future of coexistence, cannot be one-off events and must be prepared to hold several iterations over time, often years.¹²⁹

Venues: The Importance of the Physical Space, Third Countries, and Level of Publicity

In addition to the chosen format for the dialogue, our research also suggests that the venue also matters for the success of Track 2 dialogues. In *The Art of Gathering*, seasoned facilitator

¹²³ Dialogue with U.S.-China scholar, February 2023.

¹²⁴ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹²⁵ George P. Shultz, *Life and Learning after One Hundred Years: Trust Is the Coin of the Realm*, Hoover Institution, December 13, 2020.

¹²⁶ Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, “Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust,” John L. Thornton China Center Monograph Series, No. 4, March 2012, p. vi.

¹²⁷ Charles Feltman, *The Thin Book of Trust*, Think Book Publishing, 2021, p. 18.

¹²⁸ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023.

¹²⁹ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 4, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, February 2023; Santoro and Gromoll, November 2020.

Priya Parker asserts that many event hosts fail to realize that the choice of venue is one of the “most powerful levers over your guests’ behavior.”¹³⁰ Formal spaces like boardrooms, for example, may have the effect of participants deferring to senior leaders and staying quiet.¹³¹ Parker also highlights what she terms the “Château Principle,” which in its narrowest form prescribes, “Don’t host your meeting in a château if you don’t want to remind the French of their greatness and of the fact that they don’t need you after all.”¹³²

In the U.S.-China context, this means that organizers should host in neutral spaces to avoid enhancing U.S. or Chinese counterparts’ sense of superiority during a dialogue. Similarly, some of the scholars and experts we spoke to highlighted the importance of hosting dialogues in third countries to better facilitate an environment perceived as fair to both sides.¹³³

When asked about virtual gatherings, scholars and experts agreed that in-person dialogues had important advantages and should be the preferred method of engagement.¹³⁴ Specific to the China context, they said that sideline conversations in person with Chinese counterparts are particularly important for candid conversations, especially because Chinese participants are watching each other, thereby restraining what they can say.¹³⁵ One scholar said that building relationships where none exist through online interactions was not effective, but scholars who already know each other well can work together virtually.¹³⁶

Related to venue is the issue of publicity—no literature we came across or discussion we had advocated for public-facing Track 2 dialogues. According to one scholar, the details of many Track 2 dialogues are not public because, according to one scholar, given the sensitivity of the topics discussed, they are not supposed to be public.¹³⁷ Another scholar who had engaged in a public-facing Track 2 stated that the public-facing parts of the dialogue were not conducive to frank discussion.¹³⁸

¹³⁰ Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, Riverhead Books, 2018, p. 58.

¹³¹ Parker, 2018, p. 54.

¹³² Parker, 2018, p. 58-59.

¹³³ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 2, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹³⁴ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 2, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 3, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 4, February 2023. Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 6, March 2023.

¹³⁵ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 3, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 4, February 2023.

¹³⁶ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 3, February 2023.

¹³⁷ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹³⁸ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 9, April 2022.

Communication: Enabling Communication in Language of Choice

For maximum effectiveness, Track 2 dialogues must enable communication in participants' preferred language. Existing literature emphasizes the importance of having interpreters in Track 2 dialogues to enable smooth communication in the participants' language of choice and for understanding of cultural subtleties. This is especially true for technical issues such as nuclear weapons and nuclear arms control, where complex and obscure terms will tax the ability of participants to operate in a second language.¹³⁹ It is important to note that interpreters represent a big expense for these endeavors.¹⁴⁰ In her research on Track 2 diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa, Noha Aboueldahab found that those involved in Track 2 dialogues varied in opinion on the extent to which providing interpreters was sufficient or whether it was necessary to integrate native language speakers into the organizing committee itself.¹⁴¹ We did not collect enough data on this particular question to arrive at any definitive answer for the U.S.-China context, but highlight it as one for consideration moving forward.

Establishing Ground Truths and Definitions

A dialogue technique that emerged as having benefits across a variety of topics was taking time at the beginning to establish ground truths and definitions. One scholar suggested presenting what may seem to be basic facts about the issue with visuals such as a timeline of relevant events or data trends. Doing this is important because it often reveals important differences between participants that can help resolve misunderstandings going forward.¹⁴² The Track 1.5 China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue is a case in point: early dialogue iterations revealed that the U.S. and China viewed important concepts like deterrence differently, with the Chinese side objecting to using the term *deterrence* because of the interpretation that it meant blackmail and compellance.¹⁴³ Coming to a common understanding of basic concepts was so difficult it took four to five years.¹⁴⁴

Resilience Through Adaptation

Especially if they intend to develop a Track 2 dialogue that lasts for years, Track 2 organizers highlighted the importance of making the efforts resilient to changes in the environment through a high level of adaptiveness. Organizers need to prepare for challenges that are both internal and

¹³⁹ Wheeler, 2014, p. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Wheeler, 2014, p. 15.

¹⁴¹ Aboueldahab, 2022.

¹⁴² Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹⁴³ Santoro and Gromoll, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Santoro and Gromoll, 2020.

external to the dialogue. Internal challenges can arise from logistical issues as well as from the behavior of participants, including last minute scheduling issues and cancellations. If the impact of a Track 2 process hinges on the participation of specific, high-influence individuals, organizers must consider what will happen if those particular individuals no longer can participate. During the dialogue itself, the moderators need to be trained and prepared to manage tense interactions and disruptive participants to ensure they do not derail the event.¹⁴⁵

External challenges and changes also can impact dialogues, so organizers need to prepare to adapt to them. Research and conversations highlighted several external challenges:

- Pandemics and natural disasters: Organizers need to plan for the possibility of pandemics and natural disasters interfering with their carefully planned events. COVID-19, for example, greatly reduced the interactions between the U.S. and China: Scott Kennedy and Wang Jisi highlight that flights between the countries dropped by 95% from 2019-2022, making it incredibly difficult to have meaningful person-to-person exchanges.¹⁴⁶
- Ups and downs in the overarching bilateral relationship: Organizers also need to prepare for the impact of the ups and downs of the overall bilateral relationship. One organizer of an ongoing US-China dialogue said that after Xi Jinping and Barack Obama met in Sunnylands in 2013, the overall atmosphere of the dialogue was good, but after 2017 with the trade war and other bilateral tensions, the environment became “really bad.”¹⁴⁷ One scholar suggested that in the event that relations worsen or conflict breaks out, organizers can retool the dialogue to slow or manage the conflict.¹⁴⁸
- Evolving national power. Organizers must also consider how changes in national power over time may affect dialogues. For example, in the years that iterations of the Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue were held from 2004-2019, China changed drastically in terms of its economy, military capabilities, and regional and global stature. These changes in China greatly altered the overall geopolitical backdrop upon which dialogues took place.¹⁴⁹
- Evolving stakeholders: Organizers also need to prepare for new stakeholders in certain policy issues. One scholar highlighted that as an issue evolves over time, there may be new stakeholders that arise or entirely new policy positions that must be represented in the dialogue.¹⁵⁰

Impact

If the ultimate goal of Track 2 dialogues is to change policy or facilitate better relations for a long-term future of coexistence, establishing mechanisms to transfer information to Track 1

¹⁴⁵ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 1, February 2023; Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Kennedy and Wang, 2023, p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 4, February 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Santoro and Gromoll, 2020, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁰ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

policy actors must be considered from the planning stage in order to ensure policy impact.¹⁵¹ As one scholar put it, “It is important that each side knows the other is going back and talking to important people – this is important for actually seeing policy change.”¹⁵² There are a few ways to ensure this. Participants must have direct lines of communication back to relevant policymakers—perhaps, as Dalia Kaye has suggested, establishing a policy “mentor,” or an official policy maker who takes on ideas generated from the Track 2 process and has the power to transfer them into actual policy.¹⁵³

It is also important for the organizers themselves to have direct lines of communication to policymakers as a sort of insurance policy for communication, especially if participants miscommunicate what is said at the dialogues to the policy community. One organizer of Track 2 dialogues stressed the importance of devoting resources to writing reports on what happened at the dialogues and sending them to relevant parties to ensure everyone received the same information.¹⁵⁴

We also suggest that organizers of Track 2 dialogues between the same two countries have a way to communicate and coordinate with each other to maximize and streamline impact. Over the course of this research, the authors met several individuals who were interested in or in the process of establishing Track 2 dialogues with China, but it did not appear there was any coordination across these efforts. We suggest establishing a body within each country to coordinate across efforts to ensure policymakers are understanding the context of these disparate efforts and taking away coherent messages for policy from Track 2 dialogues.

Relevance to the U.S.-China Context

Taken together, these lessons provide useful guidance in the design and execution of future U.S.-China Track 2 dialogues. Following these guidelines will not ensure a successful and influential Track 2 process, but it will avoid pitfalls that can undermine such goals in structural and interpersonal ways. These findings also offer ideas for the design of the new Track 2 initiative on long-term coexistence, ideas incorporated in the findings and recommendations that follow.

Our research on past U.S.-China Track 2 dialogues suggests that several of these lessons, though mainly drawn from the general literature on Track 2 dialogues, may be very relevant to future U.S.-China endeavors. *Finding the right people* is clearly a priority in order to generate policy impact and was mentioned by just about every expert on and organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 events we spoke with. Especially on the Chinese side, identifying participants capable of

¹⁵¹ Staats, 2019.

¹⁵² Dialogue with U.S.-China Track scholar, February 2023.

¹⁵³ Kaye, 2007, p. 24.

¹⁵⁴ Dialogue with organizer of U.S.-China Track 2 initiatives 5, March 2023.

sharing the outcomes of Track 2 events with government officials, or writing about their experiences in ways that would shape the context for long-term policy, is a precondition for some degree of success.

The *balance of technical and political-strategic issues* is equally important in the U.S.-China context, largely because of the insistence on the Chinese side in dealing with what it perceives as the dominant barriers to mutual respect and stability. Multiple participants in Track 2 events have described running aground on this issue, finding it impossible to make progress on narrower or more technical questions without confronting the more intractable issues in the bilateral relationship.

Issues of the detailed *design* of Track 2 events have significant relevance to U.S.-China dialogues and more broadly. These are likely to be the most generally applicable of the lessons from Track 2 dialogues beyond the U.S.-China context, because they deal with general human dynamics and the requirements for creating trust and an effective working environment. Our experience and the discussions conducted for this analysis validate this conclusion for American and Chinese participants. Issues such as choice of venue and using special activities to build trust have been important in past dialogues and are likely to be critical to future success. However, in the current situation, ideological differences have the potential to undercut Track 2 effectiveness even given the best design approaches. Finally, the importance of *adaptation* is clear from the last several years of the U.S.-China relationship. This was true, most obviously, because of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic scuttled existing in-person Track 2 efforts and forced various forms of virtual replacements. But adaptation has also been required because of the dramatic swings in the relationship. Sponsors of Track 2 dialogues have had to find ways to weather crises and declining interest on both sides in ideas designed to improve U.S.-China relations.

Chapter 6. Findings and Recommendations

In this report, we undertook a detailed assessment (1) of the need for and potential of a major new U.S.-China Track 2 initiative designed to generate a roadmap to a shared future and (2) to define in detail some of the elements of a form of coexistence that meets the vital interests of both sides. Our research and discussions produced four broad findings.

Beginning to Create the Basis of a Shared Vision of a Future of Coexistence Is Both Urgently Needed and Possible

This research confirmed our initial and broadest hypothesis: In the effort to stabilize U.S.-China relations, there is a significant gap in terms of agreed conceptions of what a future could look like that would fulfill the core interests of each side—a portrait of a future world of coexistence. This portrait is needed because of the trajectory of the relationship, which has been highly negative for years and embodies certain structural drivers that may continue to push the two sides toward dangerous confrontations. But such an effort has some opportunity to contribute because of the countervailing appreciation on both sides of the risks of a relationship in free-fall. Our discussions also revealed a general agreement that there is a problematic absence of detailed foresight about potential futures that represent sustainable forms of coexistence. Various studies and official documents have laid out generic phrases, bumper stickers, and vague concepts, but no one has defined potential futures of this sort in persuasive, technically sophisticated detail.

In sum, our research confirmed the need in the U.S.-China relationship for a more concrete vision of a medium- to long-term future, from five to thirty years ahead, in which the United States and China can both satisfy their respective vital interests—a non-zero-sum portrait of a shared future, one with which both great powers can live in a sustainable way.

A Carefully Designed Track 2 Initiative on the Requirements for Long-Term Stability in the U.S.-China Relationship Could Have Important Value

Our research suggested that, although the empirical record of Track 2 efforts is uneven, in the right context, such efforts have made important contributions—along with parallel and reinforcing factors—to improving bilateral relations. This has occurred in contexts ranging from Middle East peace processes to U.S.-India relations to specific issue areas in the U.S.-China relationship. The potential for catalytic outcomes should not be exaggerated: Even successful Track 2 processes achieve significant effects on relationships only when they take place in a supportive context and are combined with other actions, such as government-to-government talks

or wider political moves toward stabilization. But the record of such initiatives provides at least the hope that a long-term assessment of coexistence scenarios in the U.S.-China relationship could make a real impact.

We reach this conclusion in part because our research highlights several criteria for anticipating when Track 2 dialogues are more likely to influence a relationship. These criteria include the potential to create a socialization dynamic among influential participants, the possibility of exporting ideas into the larger debate and the policy process, the degree of ripeness in the broader relationship, a sense on both sides of the desire for some improvement in ties, and an appetite for specific policy ideas. One of the seeming contradictions in U.S.-China relations today is that such perceptions clearly exist: Both sides appreciate the powerful interests that they have in stable coexistence, even alongside deepening mistrust and specific actions that are producing a spiral of hostility. Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s recent trip to Beijing and the official statements about it from both sides reflected yet another sign of this mutual desire for stabilization.

To be clear, any effort to develop a long-term vision for coexistence will have to contend with extreme mistrust on both sides, an increasingly entrenched perception of a zero-sum contest, and several political barriers to any forms of collaboration. But these challenges were precisely why we selected a substantive focus on the long term—to try to escape the constraints of existing disputes and allow participants to discuss more hypothetical futures in an open-ended way and in rigorous technical detail. The hope is that these aspects of the report will echo back into shorter-term policy actions and beliefs.

Track 2 Initiatives Should Construct Significant Epistemic Communities in Both Countries That Are Committed to the Goals of the Effort and Generate Specific, Actionable Ideas for Progress

A Track 2 process is unlikely to trigger a wholesale restoration of trust in the U.S.-China relationship; levels of mutual suspicion in official and some elements of the analytical communities are simply too high. Nor can we assume that there will be rapid and significant progress on what some call the “Track 2 to Track 1 transfer problem”—how to move ideas from the non-government track into active consideration by the two governments. Many recent and ongoing Track 2 processes highlight the difficulty of either government acting on ideas produced in these forums. Many scholars with long experience in Track 2 dialogues described themselves as pessimistic—some exceedingly so—about the potential for policy uptake for the time being, especially on the Chinese side. Chinese officials have become so suspicious of U.S. motives and intent that it may be difficult to gain traction for specific policy ideas germinated in a Track 2 setting. Similar levels of mistrust exist on the U.S. side, where the substance of Track 2 dialogues is sometimes viewed by U.S. policymakers as watered-down versions of Chinese propaganda.

This is precisely why a new dialogue aimed at the medium to long term makes more sense than one trying to generate ideas to be rapidly taken up in the two sides' policy processes. Yet abandoning any connection to Track 1 would be a mistake: A key theme in the literature on effective Track 2 dialogues is that “both track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues are most successful when they have some connection to the formal policy process.”¹⁵⁵ Any new effort will generate more meaningful discussion of actual policies and will be viewed as more significant and thus attract more attention, if it is believed to inform the thinking and policy development processes of the two governments.

One way of mitigating this dilemma would be to find specific offices or senior leaders on both sides who are willing to be involved with the effort and provide at least informal support and guidance. One study argued that, separately from a general transmission of recommendations to policymakers as a whole, “A critical element in successful transmission of track 2 ideas is the existence of a policy ‘mentor’ (an official policymaker) who takes on such ideas and has the power to transfer concepts into actual policy.”¹⁵⁶ Identifying such offices or individuals could be an important step in designing a new Track 2 endeavor.

Odds of Success Will Be Improved if the Effort Reflects Several Primary Research-Based Criteria for Effective Track 2 Initiatives

Our analysis found that the design elements of such an effort that would be critical to success. The characteristics are typical of more successful Track 2 initiatives are reflected in the Five Pillars scheme outlined in Figure 5.1. They are as follows:

- *Effective Track 2 efforts have the right people in the room.* Track 2 dialogues tend to work best when participants have a healthy degree of expertise in the subject area, experience in the policy environment, credible reputations and significant public profile in their home countries, and personal ties to current policymakers. Successful Track 2 efforts also attend to participants' needs to ensure consistent and energetic participation.
- *In the area of content, successful Track 2 dialogues often embody some combination of a compelling, over-arching “big idea” designed to deal with major political disputes with detailed analysis of technical issues leading to specific policy proposals.* Some successful Track 2 efforts have had a relatively narrow and technical focus, but many embody a more ambitious core goal or idea that generates energy and attention to the effort—for example, dialogues under the rubric of fundamentally shifting Arab-Israeli or U.S.-India relations. In the U.S.-China context, Track 2 efforts that have tried to remain limited to technical issues have had difficulty breaking through larger political atmospherics. A new effort should touch both sides of this spectrum and attempt to use the long-term, future scenario-building nature of the proposed venture to create space for agreed principles for long-term relations that could open space for agreement on technical issues as well.

¹⁵⁵ Staats, Walsh, and Tucci, 2019.

¹⁵⁶ Kaye, 2007, p. 24.

- *In terms of the design of the efforts, the structure of the dialogue is tailored to the subject matter and the nature of the participants.* Track 2 dialogues can be organized in very different ways: classic conference style, small-group interaction, working groups feeding into a main group, virtual, or in person. Facilitators can use many different techniques to spur discussion. One hallmark of successful Track 2 efforts is an effective alignment between the structure and techniques chosen to manage the discussion and the topic and membership of the dialogue. Specific design elements likely to be important to such an initiative include venue choice, handling issues of language and translation, significantly incorporating smaller-ground breakout sessions, and using multiple events to build relationships and trust among the participants.
- *Facilitators and participants have a capacity to adapt to changes in the context, agenda, or substance of the dialogue.* Many Track 2 efforts confront significant surprises and alterations in their context, membership, substance, or other elements during their lifespan. This is especially true of efforts that continue for years to build enduring relations among participants. Adaptation to changed circumstances is an important characteristic of successful efforts.
- *Discussions identify specific and carefully designed avenues to impact.* Effective Track 2 efforts typically begin with a clear strategy for achieving impact, almost always involving some degree of planning to bring ideas over to the policy realm in the short or long term. But such impact most commonly emerges from dialogues that allow for long-term, often relatively frequent and in-depth interactions by a consistent set of participants to allow personal connections to emerge. As noted previously, impact can emerge in various forms—through the expert communities created, the relationships among those communities, and the generation and publicizing of ideas, as well as through the actual adoption of those ideas by the governments of either side.

Following these basic principles cannot guarantee success but will make it more likely. When applied to the specific proposal being investigated here, these categories have several implications. Many potential participants in the United States and China could meet the criteria for the “right people in the room,” for example. Obtaining commitments from a critical mass of such people to an ongoing dialogue lasting at least two years would be an important preparatory step to forming the actual dialogue. In terms of substance, the effort has a ready-made “big idea”—envisioning a future of coexistence. It should also include specific working groups on several major issues, dealing with them on a more technical level. Finally, organizers should seek out one or more mentor offices or individuals in each government who commit at least to endorse the process and follow its results.

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Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
APLN	Asia-Pacific Leadership Network
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAP	Center for American Progress
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCIEE	China Center for International Economic Exchanges
CFHRD	China Foundation for Human Rights Development
CFISS	China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies
CICIR	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations
CISCSS	National Institute for South China Sea Studies
CNA	Center for Naval Analysis
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
COSC	Counselors Office of the State Council of China
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSCAP	Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific
DFC	Development Finance Corporation
DRM	Dialogue and Research Monitor
DTRA	U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency
IDA	Institute for Defense Analysis
IDCPC	International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China
JCIE	Japan Center for International Exchange
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCAFP	National Committee on American Foreign Policy
NCUSCR	National Committee on U.S.-China Relations
NDU	PLA National Defense University
NEACD	Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue
PDP	Stanford-Harvard Preventive Defense Project
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLARF	PLA Rocket Force
SIIS	Shanghai Institutes for International Studies
UCTPF	U.S.-China Transpacific Foundation
USCC	U.S. Chamber of Commerce

USIP
WRI

United States Institute of Peace
World Resources Institute

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