



# Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries

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The international system appears headed for a renewed era of intense competition among major powers. The authors sought to identify the factors that keep such rivalries stable and those that lead to conflictual outcomes. Leveraging theory and historical case studies, the authors created a framework for assessing the stability of a strategic rivalry, then applied it to the current U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China competitions.



## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What can international relations theory and the history of great-power rivalries tell us about the key drivers of stability and instability in relations among leading states?
- What is the state of the two key rivalries—with Russia and China—that the United States faces today?
- What policies are required for the United States to maintain stability in its rivalries with China and Russia?
- What are the implications for the U.S. Army as it adjusts for a period of intensified rivalries with Russia and China?



## KEY FINDINGS

### Stable Rivalries Are Associated with a Number of Key Factors

- Stable rivalries are defined by two key characteristics: the mutual acceptance of a shared status quo and a resilient equilibrium to absorb shocks and weather discontinuities.
- Historical and theoretical analysis suggests that stability is a function of the conditions that underlie the stability of a rivalry, including both contextual and policy factors and the key strategic perceptions of the rivals.

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### The U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China Rivalries Show Dangerous Signs of Instability

- The vast majority of the key factors that were assessed for this report are driving both the U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia rivalries toward instability rather than stability.
- The sole stabilizing factors at the moment relate to the mutual possession of deterring military power and the potentially devastating consequences of any conflict.

### The United States Has Policy Options to Stabilize These Rivalries

- The United States could seek to stabilize one or more of these rivalries if it chose; it has many potential policy options to do so.
- These options range from symbolic status-granting steps to more concrete crisis-management and confidence-building measures.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Consider the unintended effects of military capability decisions. The deterrent effect of capability decisions is only half of the equation. When making decisions about posture or capability development, the United States should also consider their effects on stability.
- Take seriously the need to develop formal and informal rules of the road. Historical evidence highlights the importance of rules and agreements to stabilize rivalries.
- Shape the international system to magnify its constraining effects. U.S. policy should seek to sustain and, where possible, deepen the set of norms and institutions the United States has helped create since 1945, which have served as a stabilizing ballast in the international system by making international status contingent on some degree of restraint.
- Seek opportunities for mutual transparency, notification, and arms control. These formal agreements would go beyond the rules of the road mentioned earlier to limit the deployment of new capabilities and create mechanisms to reduce uncertainty.
- Look for ways to grant rivals increased status in exchange for creating a trade space for arrangements that would serve U.S. interests and enhance stability. If the United States is willing to offer signifiers of status in, for example, international institutions, it could both create a trade space for achieving other goals and reduce the incipient instability of the two rivalries.
- The U.S. Army will serve the nation's interests most effectively if it continuously thinks in terms of stabilizing the rivalries rather than merely providing capabilities to threaten the adversary.