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# Nuclear Policy and Global Competition: Understanding the Impact of the United States-China Rivalry

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***Abstract***

*This study analyzes the nuclear rivalry between the United States and China and its impact on global security and strategic stability. Using a qualitative descriptive approach based on literature analysis, the research applies the Security Dilemma framework to explain how defensive policies can foster mutual distrust and intensify strategic competition. The findings reveal that although the two countries adopt different nuclear policies and non-proliferation approaches, both continue to enhance their deterrence capabilities in response to perceived security threats. China's nuclear modernization and the United States' focus on extended deterrence and advanced defense systems have reinforced reciprocal insecurity, increasing the risk of arms competition and strategic miscalculation. The study further shows that this rivalry undermines the effectiveness of the global non-proliferation regime by limiting transparency and complicating arms control efforts. Its consequences extend beyond bilateral relations, affecting regional and international security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, strengthening strategic dialogue, confidence-building measures, and policy transparency is essential to reducing tensions and preserving long-term global stability.*

***Keywords—*** *Nuclear rivalry, Security dilemma, United States and China relations, Non-proliferation, Global security.*

## 1. Introduction

The strategic competition between the United States and China has become one of the most significant developments in contemporary international politics. Economic disputes have expanded into technology, military affairs, and geopolitical influence. As competition intensifies, nuclear policy has become an increasingly important dimension of bilateral relations because it directly affects deterrence, crisis management, and international stability (Perkovich, 2022; SIPRI, 2024a).

The United States continues to modernize its nuclear forces while strengthening its security commitments in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, China has accelerated the expansion of its nuclear arsenal through the development of new intercontinental ballistic missiles, missile silos, strategic submarines, and long-range bombers. Beijing maintains its long-standing No First Use (NFU) doctrine and argues that its modernization is intended to preserve a credible second-strike capability rather than achieve nuclear superiority (Kristensen et al., 2024; Talmadge, 2019).

These developments have generated concerns over the emergence of a new nuclear rivalry between Washington and Beijing. Unlike the bipolar nuclear competition of the Cold War, the current rivalry unfolds in a more complex strategic environment characterized by

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technological innovation, cyber capabilities, missile defense systems, and regional security disputes. The absence of comprehensive bilateral arms control agreements further increases uncertainty and the risk of strategic miscalculation (Burds, 2024; SIPRI, 2024b).

Nuclear competition is also closely linked to the issue of proliferation policy. The United States has traditionally promoted non-proliferation through international institutions and alliance frameworks while maintaining an extended deterrence posture. China similarly supports the objectives of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and continues to emphasize minimum deterrence and strategic restraint, yet it has been reluctant to join arms reduction arrangements comparable to those negotiated by Washington and Moscow (Arms Control Association, 2025; SIPRI, 2025).

Beyond military considerations, nuclear technology possesses both civilian and strategic value. Peaceful nuclear applications contribute to electricity generation, medicine, agriculture, and industrial innovation. However, the dual-use nature of nuclear technology creates persistent concerns regarding proliferation risks, strategic competition, and international verification mechanisms. Consequently, changes in the nuclear policies of major powers have consequences that extend beyond bilateral relations and influence the broader architecture of global governance and security (SIPRI, 2024a).

Existing scholarship has extensively examined China's nuclear modernization, the United States' deterrence strategy, and the evolution of international non-proliferation regimes. Other studies have analyzed strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific or the implications of emerging military technologies. Nevertheless, these discussions are often conducted separately. There remains limited research that integrates the dynamics of the United States–China nuclear rivalry, compares their respective approaches to nuclear proliferation policy, and evaluates the combined implications for global security within a single analytical framework. This article seeks to address that gap by connecting these three dimensions and demonstrating how they collectively shape the evolving international nuclear order.

Accordingly, this study analyzes the strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the nuclear domain, examines the approaches adopted by both countries toward nuclear proliferation, and evaluates the implications of these developments for global security. Through this integrated perspective, the article contributes to a broader understanding of great-power competition and its consequences for strategic stability, international security governance, and the future of the global nuclear regime.

## 2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

This study employs the Security Dilemma as its main analytical framework to explain the nuclear competition between the United States and China. The theory argues that efforts by one state to increase its security may unintentionally decrease the security of another state. Defensive measures are often perceived as offensive intentions, leading to mutual suspicion and strategic competition. As a result, states may continue to strengthen their military capabilities even when their primary objective is deterrence rather than aggression (Jervis, 1978). Recent studies suggest that the security dilemma remains highly relevant for understanding

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contemporary great-power competition, particularly in the context of nuclear modernization and strategic uncertainty (Hiim et al., 2023).

The concept is particularly applicable to the evolving relationship between the United States and China. China's nuclear modernization, including the expansion of missile systems and second-strike capabilities, is officially presented as a means of maintaining credible deterrence under its No First Use policy. However, these developments are often interpreted by the United States as indicators of growing strategic ambition. In response, Washington continues to modernize its own nuclear forces and reinforce regional deterrence commitments. These reciprocal actions create a cycle in which both countries seek greater security but simultaneously increase each other's sense of vulnerability (Kristensen et al., 2024; SIPRI, 2024a).

Within this study, the Security Dilemma provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing the three main dimensions of discussion: the United States–China nuclear rivalry, their approaches to nuclear proliferation policy, and the implications for global security. The framework explains why nuclear modernization and policy adjustments by one power can trigger countermeasures by the other, even in the absence of offensive intentions. Consequently, strategic mistrust may undermine arms control efforts, intensify geopolitical competition, and increase the risk of instability in the international security order (SIPRI, 2025).

## 3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design using a descriptive-analytical approach. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to understand the dynamics of nuclear policy and strategic competition between the United States and China through the interpretation of documents, policies, and scholarly debates rather than statistical measurement (Creswell, 2013). The descriptive-analytical method enables the study to systematically describe empirical developments and critically examine their implications for global security and international relations.

The research relies on library research as its primary data collection technique. Data were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, government documents, and publications issued by international organizations such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the Arms Control Association. Priority was given to literature published within the last ten years to ensure the relevance and currency of the analysis. The collected materials were selected based on their credibility, academic contribution, and direct relevance to United States–China nuclear rivalry, nuclear proliferation policy, and global security (Booth et al., 2016).

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis and interpretation using the Security Dilemma framework developed by Robert Jervis. The analysis focused on identifying patterns of strategic interaction, perceptions of threat, and policy responses adopted by both countries. It further examined how nuclear modernization and proliferation policies may generate reciprocal security concerns and reinforce strategic competition. By applying this framework, the study provides a systematic explanation of how the United States–China nuclear rivalry influences broader issues of

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deterrence, arms competition, and global security governance (Bengtsson, 2016; Schreier, 2012). This analytical framework is directly relevant to the present study because it provides a coherent explanation of the relationship between United States–China nuclear rivalry, nuclear proliferation policies, and their broader implications for global security and strategic stability.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 US-China Nuclear Rivalry

The nuclear rivalry between the United States and China has become an increasingly important dimension of great-power competition. Unlike the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the current competition is characterized by asymmetric nuclear capabilities, rapid technological innovation, and strategic ambiguity. The United States maintains a significantly larger and more sophisticated nuclear arsenal. In contrast, China has accelerated the modernization of its nuclear forces to ensure the credibility of its deterrence posture and enhance its ability to survive a potential first strike. This dynamic has intensified strategic mistrust and increased concerns over long-term stability in the international security environment (Kristensen et al., 2024; SIPRI, 2025).

China's nuclear modernization reflects broader changes in its national security strategy under Xi Jinping. In recent years, Beijing has expanded missile silo construction, diversified its nuclear delivery systems, and strengthened its sea-based deterrent. Officially, China continues to endorse a No First Use (NFU) policy and emphasizes that its nuclear forces are intended for minimum deterrence rather than offensive warfighting. However, many analysts argue that the rapid pace of modernization has reduced transparency and created uncertainty regarding China's future strategic intentions. As a result, neighboring states and the United States increasingly perceive these developments as indicators of a more assertive security posture rather than purely defensive measures (Bradley, 2022; Cunningham & Fravel, 2015).

The United States has responded by reinforcing its nuclear modernization programs and strengthening deterrence commitments in the Indo-Pacific. Investments in next-generation strategic bombers, ballistic missile submarines, missile defense systems, and closer security cooperation with allies are intended to preserve credible deterrence against emerging threats. Nevertheless, these policies also generate unintended consequences. From Beijing's perspective, enhanced missile defenses and regional military partnerships could undermine China's second-strike capability and reduce confidence in its existing deterrent. This reciprocal perception reflects the logic of the Security Dilemma, where measures designed to improve national security simultaneously increase insecurity for competitors (Lieber & Press, 2017).

Technological competition has further intensified the nuclear rivalry. The integration of artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, hypersonic weapons, and space-based assets into military planning complicates traditional deterrence calculations. These technologies may shorten decision-making time during crises and increase the risk of misperception. In particular, dual-use technologies blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear operations, making it more difficult for decision-makers to accurately assess an opponent's intentions. Consequently, strategic stability increasingly depends not

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only on the size of nuclear arsenals but also on information management, communication mechanisms, and crisis escalation control (Bruun et al., 2024; SIPRI, 2024b).

The rivalry also extends beyond military capabilities into regional influence and alliance politics. The United States has strengthened partnerships through security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, while China has expanded its geopolitical influence through economic diplomacy and infrastructure projects. Although these strategies are not directly related to nuclear weapons, they shape the broader strategic environment in which nuclear decision-making occurs. Competition over Taiwan, the South China Sea, and freedom of navigation further increases the possibility that a conventional confrontation could escalate into a nuclear crisis if strategic signaling is misinterpreted (Doshi, 2021; Garcia, 2024).

From the perspective of the Security Dilemma, the actions of both countries illustrate a classic cycle of mutual insecurity. China views nuclear modernization as necessary to preserve a credible deterrent against superior military capabilities. The United States interprets the same developments as a challenge to regional and global strategic balance and responds with additional military investments. Each side therefore considers its own actions defensive while perceiving the other's actions as potentially offensive. This cycle reinforces arms competition, reduces strategic trust, and complicates diplomatic efforts to promote transparency and arms control.

The implications of this rivalry extend beyond bilateral relations. The absence of comprehensive arms control arrangements between Washington and Beijing increases uncertainty in the global nuclear order. Other states may respond by adjusting their own defense strategies, investing in advanced military technologies, or strengthening alliance commitments. Consequently, the United States–China nuclear rivalry has become a central factor shaping twenty-first century strategic stability and presents significant challenges for global security governance, non-proliferation efforts, and crisis management in an increasingly multipolar international system.

### 4.2 US-China Policy on Nuclear Proliferation

The nuclear non-proliferation policies of the United States and China reflect different strategic calculations, even though both countries formally support the objectives of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The United States has consistently promoted international non-proliferation through export controls, multilateral institutions, and security partnerships while maintaining an extended nuclear deterrence posture. In practice, however, U.S. policy combines commitments to non-proliferation with continuous investment in nuclear modernization and advanced military technologies. This approach is intended to preserve strategic stability and reassure allies, but it also reinforces perceptions among competitors that Washington seeks to maintain long-term military superiority rather than strategic parity (Hautecouverture et al., 2021; Kristensen et al., 2024).

China’s policy follows a different logic. Beijing officially supports the NPT, maintains NFU doctrine, and repeatedly emphasizes that its nuclear forces are designed for minimum deterrence rather than coercive diplomacy. Nevertheless, China has expanded its missile infrastructure, increased the survivability of

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its strategic forces, and accelerated the modernization of its nuclear command systems. These developments indicate that Beijing seeks to ensure a credible second-strike capability in response to changes in the international security environment rather than simply increase the number of warheads. From the Chinese perspective, the expansion of missile defense systems, precision conventional strike capabilities, and alliance networks led by the United States creates uncertainty about the credibility of its existing deterrent and therefore necessitates modernization (Tellis, 2022).

**Figure 1. US Missiles as Part of Nuclear Weapons Technology Development**

Source: (CNN Indonesia, 2022).

Viewed through the Security Dilemma, the interaction between these policies creates a cycle of mutual suspicion. The United States interprets China's expanding nuclear capabilities as evidence of a broader strategic ambition that could alter the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. China, in turn, perceives U.S. modernization programs and regional military deployments as attempts to weaken its retaliatory capability and constrain its rise. Consequently, policies that are presented domestically as defensive are interpreted externally as offensive. The resulting lack of trust encourages each side to continue strengthening its military posture, even though both claim to pursue stability and deterrence rather than conflict (Jervis, 1978).

The proliferation issue should therefore be understood not only in terms of preventing additional states from acquiring nuclear weapons but also in terms of vertical proliferation among existing nuclear powers. The United States and China are engaged in qualitative competition involving missile defense, hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and early-warning systems. Such competition increases the sophistication of nuclear forces without necessarily violating existing international agreements. However, these technological advancements can reduce crisis stability by compressing decision-making time and increasing the possibility that routine military activities are interpreted as preparations for attack. In this context, proliferation becomes closely linked to technological innovation and strategic signaling rather than merely to warhead numbers (SIPRI, 2025).

**Figure 2. China Wants to Protect Itself with Nuclear Weapons**

Source: (Muhaimin, 2019)

Another critical issue concerns the absence of a comprehensive bilateral arms control framework between Washington and Beijing. Unlike the historical U.S.–Russia experience, the United States and

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China lack institutionalized mechanisms for transparency, verification, and legally binding limitations on strategic capabilities. This institutional gap magnifies uncertainty because each side must infer the intentions of the other based primarily on observable military developments rather than negotiated commitments. According to the Security Dilemma, such conditions encourage worst-case planning and increase the likelihood that ambiguous actions will be interpreted as hostile. Consequently, strategic competition may intensify even when political leaders do not actively seek escalation.

The findings of this study suggest that United States and China nuclear policies are driven less by offensive intentions than by competing perceptions of insecurity. Each government seeks to maintain a credible deterrent and protect its national interests. However, these efforts generate reciprocal responses that deepen strategic competition and weaken mutual confidence. The Security Dilemma thus explains why modernization programs, missile defense initiatives, and changes in nuclear posture can unintentionally encourage further proliferation and arms racing despite both countries publicly supporting non-proliferation norms.

From a broader perspective, this dynamic has significant implications for global nuclear governance. If strategic competition continues to dominate policy choices, the effectiveness of the international non-proliferation regime may gradually decline as transparency decreases and incentives for arms control diminish. Conversely, sustained strategic dialogue, confidence-building measures, and greater policy transparency could reduce misperceptions and interrupt the cycle of reciprocal insecurity identified by the Security Dilemma. Therefore, the future of nuclear non-proliferation will depend not only on legal commitments but also on the ability of the United States and China to manage their strategic rivalry without transforming deterrence into uncontrolled escalation.

### 4.3 Implications for Global Security

The intensifying nuclear rivalry between the United States and China has significant implications for global security because it extends beyond bilateral competition and influences the broader international strategic environment. As both countries modernize their nuclear forces and invest in emerging military technologies, concerns over strategic stability continue to increase. Although neither side officially seeks nuclear conflict, the absence of mutual trust creates uncertainty regarding intentions and future capabilities. This uncertainty encourages both governments to maintain high levels of military preparedness, thereby increasing the risk of crisis escalation and strategic miscalculation (Roberts, 2023; SIPRI, 2025).

From the perspective of the Security Dilemma, the interaction between Washington and Beijing demonstrates how defensive policies can unintentionally generate greater insecurity. China's expansion of its missile infrastructure and second-strike capability is intended to ensure the survivability of its deterrent force. However, these measures are often interpreted by the United States as evidence of an expanding strategic challenge. In response, Washington strengthens missile defense systems, nuclear modernization programs, and alliance commitments in the Indo-Pacific. China subsequently perceives these actions as attempts to undermine its deterrent credibility and responds with additional military investments. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle in which both

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parties seek security but collectively reduce strategic stability.

This rivalry also places increasing pressure on the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. While both countries remain committed to the NPT, their emphasis on modernization and strategic competition may weaken international confidence in arms control initiatives. Smaller states may interpret the continued expansion of advanced nuclear capabilities by major powers as evidence that nuclear deterrence remains the ultimate guarantee of national security. Such perceptions could reduce incentives for disarmament and complicate diplomatic efforts to strengthen non-proliferation norms and verification mechanisms (SIPRI, 2024b).

Technological developments further magnify these challenges. Competition increasingly involves hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, cyber operations, space assets, and advanced command-and-control systems rather than merely the number of nuclear warheads. These technologies shorten decision-making time during crises and make it more difficult to distinguish between conventional and nuclear operations. As a consequence, accidental escalation or misinterpretation of military activities becomes more likely, particularly during periods of heightened political tension over Taiwan or the South China Sea (Dev, 2025).

Another important implication concerns regional security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia increasingly rely on extended deterrence guarantees, while China seeks to strengthen its own strategic position through military modernization and regional influence. This environment may encourage additional defense spending, greater reliance on advanced weapons systems, and closer military alignments among regional actors. Consequently, strategic competition between the United States and China has the potential to stimulate broader arms racing beyond the bilateral level and reshape the regional balance of power (Cliff, 2020).

The qualitative analysis conducted in this study indicates that the principal threat to global security arises not solely from the expansion of nuclear arsenals but from persistent strategic mistrust. The Security Dilemma demonstrates that both countries interpret the other's defensive measures through a lens of potential hostility, leading to reciprocal policy adjustments that reinforce competition. In the absence of effective communication channels and transparency mechanisms, these dynamics increase the probability of miscalculation during crises and reduce opportunities for cooperative security arrangements.

Ultimately, the implications of the United States–China nuclear rivalry extend to the future of international security governance. Sustained competition without credible arms control dialogue may weaken existing non-proliferation institutions and undermine long-term strategic stability. Conversely, institutionalized confidence-building measures, regular strategic communication, and greater transparency regarding nuclear doctrines could mitigate the cycle of mutual suspicion. Therefore, managing the Security Dilemma between the United States and China is essential not only for bilateral relations but also for preserving global peace, strengthening the non-proliferation regime, and reducing the risks of nuclear escalation in the twenty-first century.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that the nuclear rivalry between the United States and

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China has become a key element of contemporary great-power competition. The analysis shows that both countries continue to modernize their nuclear capabilities to strengthen deterrence and safeguard national security. However, these measures are frequently interpreted by the opposing side as potential threats. As explained by the Security Dilemma, such perceptions create a cycle of mutual distrust and encourage further military competition despite the absence of explicit offensive intentions. The study also finds that differences in nuclear policy and approaches to non-proliferation contribute to growing strategic uncertainty. The United States emphasizes extended deterrence, alliance commitments, and technological superiority. In contrast, China prioritizes the survivability of its nuclear forces while maintaining its official No First Use doctrine. The interaction of these policies, combined with rapid technological developments and limited transparency, increases the risk of miscalculation and complicates efforts to promote arms control and strategic stability. Finally, the implications of the United States–China nuclear rivalry extend beyond bilateral relations and directly affect global security governance. Continued strategic competition may weaken the effectiveness of the non-proliferation regime and stimulate further qualitative arms expansion. Therefore, sustained strategic dialogue, transparency, and confidence-building measures are essential to reducing tensions and preventing unintended escalation. Strengthening these mechanisms will be critical for preserving international stability and supporting a more secure global nuclear order.

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