



# Blinken in Beijing: An Opportunity to Reduce Nuclear Risk

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Nuclear weapons are likely to be on the agenda for [U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to China](#) scheduled for February 5-6. While the meeting will focus on the broader goal of opening up dialogue between the two countries, there is a possibility that both nations could agree to continue bilateral discussions on how to pursue nuclear strategic stability, which may be an opportunity for an early—and much-needed—breakthrough.

Relations between the United States and China are extraordinarily strained following several years of antagonism, and both nations' nuclear weapons policies and postures are reflecting and shaping that environment. In the void created by the lack of dialogue, dangerous dynamics have found self-reinforcing motivations in the leadership of both nations. This is exactly why it is so

important to create and maintain a concerted line of dialogue on reducing nuclear risks as a top diplomatic priority.

The good news is that there are many areas of potential common ground between the United States and China, and some early signs of momentum on which to build. Even against a receding diplomatic tide, Biden and Xi discussed the subject of arms control directly in 2021, and a related focus on nuclear weapons risk reduction featured prominently at the recent NPT Review Conference in 2022. While the latest U.S. Nuclear Posture Review affirmed many dimensions of the arms race, it also blunted some rhetoric related to competition with China, leaving room for adjustment if diplomacy leads to progress. There are numerous measures available today that could become a longer arc of arms control relations involving the United States and China—many steps that would benefit the security of both nations, and the region broadly.

If there is progress in the near term, it may take a very basic form, such as dialogues that allow each country's leaders and experts to better understand one another—and these steps should be welcomed. Yet there is far more that should at least be discussed soon especially any steps toward what should be two key priorities:

1. preventing worsening security dilemmas for both countries, and
2. reducing ambiguities that could heighten risks of miscalculation.

Importantly, this could involve both countries agreeing *not* to pursue steps that would worsen the landscape—but would require neither country to give up any current capabilities or plans.

One promising starting point stems from a concept that CSR Board member, Hon. Rose Gottemoeller, has advanced: steps that build on the history of the now-defunct U.S.-Russia Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty but focus only on nuclear capabilities (putting the *N* back in INF, as she has described it).

The INF Treaty constrained both nuclear and conventional missiles within a specific range (between 500 and 5,500 kilometers) for participating nations, and applied to both cruise and ballistic missile systems. Intermediate-range ballistic missiles play a key role in China's nuclear forces, so that seems an unlikely subject for near-term mutual constraints. However, other intermediate-range capabilities may be an area of common ground: both nations have voiced concerns regarding ground-launched cruise missile systems in the Indo-Pacific. Odds may not be high for either to accept restrictions on conventional systems anytime soon—but both sides clearly share an interest in ensuring that any such systems deployed in the region do not carry nuclear warheads. Conversations here could be a regional start to nuclear-only INF constraint concepts improving the future security environment.

One attractive part of this concept is that neither side needs to give anything up, as neither nation is known to have current plans to nuclear-arm these systems. Yet both countries would gain from collaborating to prevent this type of nuclear capability from spreading in the region. Simply syncing up on the diplomatic and technical details necessary for such an agreement could facilitate continued engagement on risk reduction.

There is another promising step that would bring additional, but not insurmountable, complexity: pledging to keep nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles out of the region. The U.S. Congress's 2022 decision to fund research into bringing this weapon back to the U.S. arsenal, despite the Pentagon canceling it in the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, muddies this approach somewhat—meaning such an agreement would likely be solely a political declaration for the time being.

However, the stabilizing effect this could provide offers a payoff that must be seriously considered. China is rightfully concerned that the United States would consider deploying this nuclear capability to its neighborhood if these warheads are re-developed. Washington should be extremely concerned about how the Indo-Pacific chessboard would change for the worse if China's reaction is to develop a nuclear-armed cruise missile capability of its own.

The naval order and strategic weapons landscape of the region have already grown complex enough for both sides. Each country stands at a point in history where they must consider steps like this. Steps that could avoid adding more ambiguity, and a blurring of conventional and nuclear systems, in order to improve the security of both nations.

For now, if these measures or others take some time to work out, the United States and China could agree to hypothesize 2-3 mutually beneficial arms control or risk reduction steps and conduct a joint exercise exploring how they might be verified. This could pave the way for greater progress. It would also mirror the history of past arms control agreements in which drafting implementation protocols helped create the political space needed for progress.

Any steps toward mutual restraint should be taken as wins by both Washington and Beijing. They can be used to help build trust, to expand China's experience in being an active leader in nuclear risk reduction and arms control steps, and to build invaluable understanding across experts on both sides.

No one harbors any illusions regarding how hard it will be to accomplish any positive progress in U.S.-China relations in the near term. But both governments must try, and should be applauded for doing so next week.