

# Reality Check

## Build Cooperation Cycles, Not Security Spirals

- Common assumptions about great-power competition are increasing the risks of crisis escalation and military confrontation.
- The United States has focused too heavily in recent years on military buildup, and too little on confidence-building measures (CBMs).
- The Biden administration should seek to create and implement new CBMs to lower tensions and mitigate the risks of future crises.

### What is the problem?

The danger of crisis escalation with China and Russia is increasing. Much of today's thinking about great-power competition suggests that the greatest threat to global order comes from what international relations scholars call "revisionist" states, countries that seek to challenge existing institutions, norms, or borders. It also suggests that the best way to respond is to build up US military capacity as a deterrent. In reality, however, the scope of Chinese and Russian intentions is largely unknown, and the act of building up military capacity can itself create a security dilemma that can spiral into an arms race or conflict. Rather than emphasizing freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs) or military exercises, policymakers should focus on hedging against risk through CBMs, particularly in the maritime, cyber, and economic spheres. CBMs were instrumental in preventing conflict during the Cold War; the most dangerous periods of the Cold War were those that saw reciprocal military buildups, while the calmest were characterized by détente and CBMs. Today, CBMs could help to prevent escalation and create a virtuous cycle of cooperation and reciprocity. As US spymaster William Colby once [said](#) to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, "The more we know about each other the safer we all are."

### What causes security dilemmas?

Revisionism is the assumption du jour in Washington; articles and panels on great-power competition are full of assertions that states like China and Russia are seeking to reshape the world. These states purportedly seek to displace the United States as regional—or global—hegemon, rewrite the international order, and even conquer their neighbors. It is certainly possible, but it is also an assertion with limited evidence behind it. As a New American Engagement Initiative (NAEI) Issue Brief recently highlighted, Chinese intentions in particular are still largely unknown—a fact even strong critics of China admit.

This creates a practical dilemma for policymakers. Strategy documents have argued that the best way to respond to perceived revisionism is to build up US and allied military capacity to deter these states. As former Undersecretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy [argues](#), "the more confident China's leaders are in their own capabilities and the more they doubt the capabilities and resolve of the United States, the greater the chance of...a breakdown in deterrence that could bring direct conflict between two nuclear powers." Recent policy choices like the Trump administration's increase in FONOPs—ostensibly to deter China—or increases in troop deployments to the Middle East—aiming to "restore deterrence" with Iran—are the logical result.

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The briefs in the New American Engagement Initiative's Reality Check series explore a particular policy or set of policies, assessing their efficacy, and, where appropriate, proposing alternatives. These short and succinct reports are designed for busy professionals anxious for pragmatic and timely options for addressing today's challenges.

There are substantial risks to taking this approach and getting it wrong. It is difficult to assess intentions; weapons designed for defensive purposes may look threatening to other states. The security dilemma is one of the trickiest problems at the heart of global affairs; faced with uncertainty, states may end up on the path to conflict without intending to do so. Unfortunately, the policies that the United States is pursuing today are, as academic Bob Jervis [puts it](#), “just those that, according to the spiral model, are most apt to heighten tensions.”

Luckily, there is an alternative. Though the Cold War is an imperfect analogy for today’s world, the ways in which the superpowers sought to defuse the security dilemma provide useful lessons. CBMs were a successful part of US Cold War strategy. They can be so again, lowering tensions while hedging against the possibility that other states are aggressive revisionists.

### What are CBMs?

CBMs originated in the 1960s following the Berlin and Cuba crises, as the United States and Soviet Union sought ways to prevent future crises from spiraling out of control. But, while most today associate CBMs with high-level arms control, in reality they started smaller, with things like the telephone hotline linking the White House and the Kremlin. Some CBMs, like the US-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement, provided a code of conduct regulating military encounters—while others, like the Helsinki Final Act, allowed for notification and observation of military exercises. These steps often helped to reassure the superpowers that their rival’s actions were defensive: aimed at providing security, not conquest.

Of course, CBMs are not a magic bullet. They do not transform relationships between states, nor can they stop a state that is a determined revisionist. But, CBMs can provide a window into one another’s capabilities and intentions, constrain the development of dangerous technologies, mitigate the security dilemma, and provide communication channels that can prevent crisis escalation. In short, they are the perfect tool for an era of shifting power dynamics and uncertainty about intentions.

### Why Does it Matter?

In recent years, US policy has leaned heavily toward deterrence over reassurance. In fact, in Washington policy debates, the word “reassurance” is most commonly applied to allies, not adversaries. When it comes to China and Russia, US officials have focused instead on building up military forces to deter those states and demonstrate resolve. In Europe, there are more than fifty thousand troops stationed in various countries. NATO has increased the number of military exercises held in recent years, while the Russian military engaged in dangerous

behavior like turning off aircraft transponders, leading to several near-collisions.

In Asia, measures have focused on resisting Chinese maritime claims. In 2019, the United States conducted nine FONOPs in the South China Sea—the most since 2015—along with nine transits of the Taiwan Strait. Not only have these exercises failed to produce policy change, but they also bring US and Chinese forces into proximity; there have been several close calls. Meanwhile, the People’s Liberation Army Air Force has been conducting an increasing number of exercises near Taiwan, including live-fire tests of air-defense systems and violations of Taiwanese airspace. The growth in such activities on both sides is concerning. As Ali Wyne and Kurt Campbell [put it](#), “U.S. and Chinese forces have few guardrails in place to prevent misunderstandings or miscalculations from escalating.”

Confidence-building measures have been far rarer. In the case of Russia, CBMs—including arms-control measures like the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and transparency-oriented measures like Open Skies—have collapsed. Meanwhile, success in creating CBMs with China has been limited. To be sure, Beijing bears much of the blame; as the weaker power, China has concerns about accidentally revealing its vulnerabilities. But, China’s growing military strength means both that it has less to fear on this front from participating in CBMs, and that the risks of strategic instability are higher. While some are critical of the fact that China remains unwilling to engage with its smaller neighbors, even bilateral CBMs may be helpful in a crisis.

The most prominent recent CBMs were two 2014 memoranda of understanding between China and the United States, which provided for notification of major military activities, and set out rules of behavior for air and maritime encounters. Both are voluntary; it is unclear how successful they have been. Likewise, a 2015 agreement to improve the use of the Defense Telephone Link was a good step, but China has reportedly been reluctant to use it. Another 2015 agreement to refrain from cyber-mitigated intellectual-property theft has been somewhat successful; Chinese infractions have fallen. Yet, other CBMs have failed to get off the ground entirely. In 2017, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump agreed on four high-level bilateral dialogues on diplomacy, economics, cybersecurity, and cultural issues. Only one convened the following year; by 2019, all were effectively dead.

Thus, the Biden administration inherits a situation in which CBMs with the United States’ two biggest rivals are minimal, but in which ostensibly deterrent military operations are frequent. Restoring the vital role of CBMs in maintaining stability and reducing tensions should be a top priority for the new administration as it seeks to repair the damage of the last four years.

## Implementing the Solution

Confidence building is a time-consuming enterprise. It took decades for the United States and Soviet Union to reach the point where they were willing to sign agreements like the Helsinki Final Act. But, the Biden administration can start the process now. Here are three ways to think about designing and constructing CBMs with China, Russia, and other states.

- 1 Take it Step By Step** One key lesson of the Cold War is to use existing agreements to leverage new ones, a process Naval War College professor Lyle Goldstein has [described](#) as “cooperation spirals.” Adding new features to existing maritime agreements—such as observation or verification of FONOPs—may be the easiest avenue for first steps with China. Policymakers should consider expanding existing CBMs into new spheres, such as extending conversations from maritime and air deconfliction into cyber or space. Cyber may be an especially fruitful area here, as there is little prospect of full-blown arms control in that sphere. Wherever possible, policymakers should seek to leverage existing agreements into new talks: for example, using a US return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to catalyze talks on Iranian missile development, or the New Strategic Arms-Reduction Treaty (New START) framework to broach more challenging arms-control issues with Russia.
- 2 Reframe the Problem** Sometimes, the biggest difficulty is remaining trapped in outdated ways of thinking about the world. In the Asia-Pacific, current CBMs often rely on existing legal frameworks like the UN Convention on

the Law of the Sea, or organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). But, these may themselves be problematic, requiring all parties to resolve existing disputes first, or transforming a workable bilateral CBM into an unwieldy multilateral mess. Here, policymakers should focus on bilateral agreements over those that privilege existing institutional frameworks. In contrast, in Europe, policymakers should think multilaterally, including European allies and partners. The Minsk Process provides one example of a multilateral way to recast Russia’s involvement in European security. Moving past the Cold War paradigm and into a more comprehensive US-Europe-Russia security mindset could prove fruitful. Regardless of the region, thinking differently can help.

- 3 Talk the Talk** The most overlooked CBMs are found at the personal level, like the successful military-to-military exchanges codified during the Cold War. Giving officials, from military commanders to political leaders, the opportunity to meet their counterparts provides an opportunity to better understand the other side and build the personal connections that can defuse future crises. Yet, US practice in recent years has been to discourage such exchanges, going so far as to make it harder for Chinese citizens to obtain student visas. The Trump-era bilateral dialogues between senior officials on diplomacy, cyber and trade should be restarted. At the non-governmental or Track Two level, the imperatives of maintaining a security clearance often make it difficult to have the kind of informal discussions that are the vital building blocks of diplomacy, whether with China, Russia, or other states. Mitigating some of these constraints to allow for more person-to-person exchanges should be the sine qua non of CBMs.

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## About the Author

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