

**China's Real and Present Danger**  
**Now Is the Time for Washington to Worry**  
**Avery Goldstein/Foreign Affairs; September/October 2013; pp. 136-144**

Much of the debate about China's rise in recent years has focused on the potential dangers China could pose as an eventual peer competitor to the United States bent on challenging the existing international order. But another issue is far more pressing. For at least the next decade, while China remains relative weak compared to the United States, there is a real danger that Beijing and Washington will find themselves in a crisis that could quickly escalate to military conflict. Unlike a long-term great-power strategic rivalry that might or might not develop down the road, the danger of a crisis involving the two nuclear-armed countries is a tangible, near-term concern --- and the events of the past few years suggest the risk might be increasing.

Since the end of the Cold War, Beijing and Washington have managed to avoid perilous showdowns on several occasions: in 1995-96, when the United States responded to Chinese missile tests intended to warn Taiwanese voters about the danger of pushing for independence; in 1999, when U.S. warplanes accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the NATO air assault on Serbia; and in 2001, when a U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet, leading to the death of the Chinese pilot and Beijing's detention of the U.S. plane and crew. But the lack of serious escalation during those episodes should not breed complacency. None of them met the definition of a genuine crisis: a confrontation that threatens vital interests on both sides and thus sharply increases the risk of war. If Beijing and Washington were to find themselves in that sort of showdown in the near future, they would both have strong incentives to resort to force. Moreover, the temptations and pressures to escalate would likely be highest in the early stages of the face-off, making it harder for diplomacy to prevent war.

---

**THIN RED LINES (Omit; please refer to the original text)**

**MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE COLD WAR? (Omit; please refer to the original text)**

**COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN (Omit; please refer to the original text)**

---

## **MANAGING THE RISK**

**The chances of a U.S.-Chinese crisis in the coming years are low, but they are not negligible, and they are more troubling by the risk of such a confrontation escalating. The most important steps Beijing and Washington can take are those that might help prevent crises from developing in the first place. Since uncertainty about the scope of each side's vital interests would be a trigger for such crises, the two countries should deepen political and military exchanges that focus closely on this problem. Even if they cannot achieve full clarity, discussions can help draw attention to what each side believes poses the greatest risks.**

**Although it will be difficult to eliminate the possibility of U.S.-Chinese confrontations, both countries can do more to address the sources of potential instability and improve their ability to manage the risks they would face during a crisis. Leaders in Washington could share their rich experience in crisis management with their Chinese counterparts, emphasizing the importance of policy coordination. In addition, the United States should stress the need for China to use the existing hot line for prompt, direct communication between the countries' top leaders during a crisis.**

**China and the United States should also deepen their currently modest military-to-military exchanges. Without compromising essential secrets, increasing familiarity with each other's military systems and practices would reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation during a showdown. Both sides would be wise to foster greater personal familiarity among the two countries' commanding officers, which, in the event of a crisis, would establish a modicum of trust that would be helpful if political leaders sought to de-escalate the conflict.**

**Getting Beijing and Washington to tackle the difficult task of containing a future crisis will not be easy. In the end, it might take the experience of living through a terrifying showdown of the kind that defined the early Cold War. But it should not have to come to that.**

**\*\*\*\*\* END \*\*\*\*\***

