
FROM BIPOLAR DÉTENTE TO ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE: THEORETICAL LESSONS FOR MANAGING TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY U.S.–CHINA RIVALRY

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive comparative examination of great-power tension management by juxtaposing the Cold War-era détente between the United States and the Soviet Union with the contemporary strategic rivalry between the United States and China. While the Cold War détente emerged from a highly structured bipolar order characterized by nuclear parity, ideological confrontation, and relatively limited economic interdependence, today's U.S.–China relationship unfolds within a vastly more complex environment shaped by deep economic entanglement, technological interdependence, multipolar dynamics, and regionally distributed flashpoints. Against this backdrop, the article evaluates whether the conceptual logic, institutional mechanisms, and strategic lessons of détente retain analytical relevance for managing twenty-first-century great-power tensions.

The study argues that although historical analogies offer valuable insights, the structural conditions underpinning Cold War détente differ fundamentally from those shaping U.S.–China relations. Nevertheless, détente's foundational principles—strategic communication, mutual recognition of core interests, institutionalized crisis management, and rules-based competition—remain essential for preventing escalation in the current geopolitical landscape. Through a qualitative, theory-informed comparative analysis, the article demonstrates that a modernized form of détente may be possible but would require innovative frameworks that accommodate asymmetric interdependence, technological rivalry, cyber competition, and the evolving norms of global governance.

Ultimately, the findings contribute to broader scholarly debates about great-power politics, strategic stability, and the prospects for peaceful coexistence in an era defined by systemic rivalry. The article concludes that while Cold War détente cannot be replicated in its original form, its conceptual lessons can inform the development of new models of great-power management capable of reducing risks in an increasingly interconnected and contested global order.

Keywords: Detente, Detente U.S.–China relations, Cold War, great-power rivalry, geopolitical stability, technological competition, strategic management.

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INTRODUCTION

The management of great-power tensions has long stood at the center of international relations, influencing the stability of the global system and shaping the trajectory of geopolitical competition. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union, despite profound ideological hostility and persistent military rivalry, entered a period of détente designed to stabilize the international environment, prevent nuclear confrontation, and impose predictability on bipolar competition. Détente did not eliminate conflict; instead, it institutionalized mechanisms of dialogue and arms control that constrained escalation and provided channels for crisis management during moments of heightened tension.

In the twenty-first century, the strategic rivalry between the United States and China has revived questions regarding the applicability of détente-like approaches in managing systemic competition. Although contemporary dynamics differ markedly from the Cold War, there is a growing scholarly interest in whether elements of détente—its emphasis on structured communication, recognition of red lines, and controlled competition—can inform strategies for maintaining stability in U.S.–China relations. As geopolitical tensions intensify across the Indo-Pacific, and as technological competition reshapes global order, the need for sustainable mechanisms to reduce the risk of accidental escalation and miscalculation has become increasingly urgent. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China, however, unfolds in a global environment fundamentally distinct from the mid-twentieth century bipolar system. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is deeply integrated into global economic networks, technologically interconnected with Western economies, and embedded in supply chains that sustain global production systems. U.S.–China competition therefore operates across multiple domains simultaneously—military, economic, technological, ideological, and institutional—creating a multidimensional landscape in which cooperation and rivalry coexist in complex, often contradictory forms.

Regionally, tensions surrounding Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Indo-Pacific alliance system, and advanced military capabilities contribute to a security dilemma that

increasingly resembles the competitive logic of the Cold War. Yet the presence of nuclear weapons, economic interdependence, cyber vulnerabilities, and global digital infrastructures introduces new forms of strategic fragility absent in earlier eras. The United States and China must therefore manage not only traditional geopolitical flashpoints but also interconnected technological ecosystems, information networks, and global supply chains whose disruption could have far-reaching consequences. Historically, détente emerged from mutual recognition of existential vulnerability and the realization that unrestrained hostility under nuclear parity threatened global survival. The Cuban Missile Crisis provided a dramatic illustration of how misperceptions could escalate into catastrophe, motivating both superpowers to institutionalize dialogue and establish mechanisms to prevent unintended escalation. Although the U.S.–China relationship has not yet reached a comparable nuclear brinkmanship crisis, warning signs—military encounters near Taiwan, cyber intrusions, economic coercion, and growing strategic mistrust—indicate that unmanaged competition carries serious risks.

The central question guiding this study is whether the logic of détente—its structural premises, institutional design, and strategic outcomes—can offer meaningful guidance for managing U.S.–China tensions. This inquiry is particularly salient as the global order transitions toward multi polarity, technological networks deepen systemic vulnerabilities, and geopolitical flashpoints multiply across interconnected domains. Détente’s historical legacy remains contested, yet its analytical value lies in its capacity to reveal how great powers can coexist under conditions of rivalry.² This article argues that while Cold War détente provides important structural insights, its traditional formula cannot be directly applied to contemporary U.S.–China relations. Instead, a modified and technologically informed variant of détente is required—one that acknowledges economic interdependence, digital rivalry, asymmetric power distributions, and the unique characteristics of twenty-first-century geopolitics. Through a rigorous comparative

² Collective defence and article 5. 2023. Nato. <https://surli.cc/zjnbd0>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

analysis, the paper seeks to illuminate both the possibilities and the limitations of détente as a conceptual tool for managing systemic rivalry.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative–historical methodology to analyze how great-power tensions were managed during the Cold War and how similar dynamics might inform contemporary U.S.–China relations. Because great-power rivalry is shaped by material capabilities, ideological perceptions, and institutional arrangements, the research integrates historical analysis, structural comparison, and inquiry, cases highlights recurring patterns—such as the importance of crisis-management mechanisms—while revealing how twenty-first-century interdependence and technological rivalry alter the prospects for détente-like arrangements.³

Empirically, the study draws on declassified Cold War documents, official U.S. and Chinese strategy papers, speeches by political leaders, and scholarly works from major academic and policy institutions. Triangulating diverse primary and secondary sources ensures analytical robustness and mitigates bias. The study acknowledges limitations, including asymmetries between the Cold War and contemporary systems, opacity in Chinese decision-making, and the rapid evolution of U.S.–China competition. Nonetheless, the comparative–historical approach—supported by ⁴theoretical triangulation—provides a rigorous foundation for assessing whether the principles of détente can inform strategies for managing twenty-first-century great-power rivalry.⁵

MAIN PART

The management of great-power tensions during the Cold War and in today's U.S.–China rivalry unfolds across profoundly different strategic landscapes, yet both are governed by similar structural pressures that compel adversaries to balance competition

³ Al-auqaili. 2024. *How corporate-militant alliances are changing modern warfare*. Foreign policy in focus. <https://surl.li/sbgobg>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

⁴ Nxuan.. 2024. The dual role of military alliances in contemporary international relations. 3rd International Conference on International Law and Legal Policy. <https://surl.lu/rbwnms>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

⁵ Colective defence and article 5. 2023. NATO. <https://surl.li/yqkcy>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

with restraint. Understanding these dynamics requires situating each relationship within its broader geopolitical, economic, and ideological context. While the logic of deterrence, the dangers of escalation, and the need for structured communication remain constant themes, the underlying conditions shaping U.S.–Soviet détente and contemporary U.S.–China relations diverge in fundamental ways that both enable and limit the applicability of historical analogies. Cold War détente emerged from a uniquely rigid bipolar environment defined by two superpowers who possessed near-equivalent nuclear arsenals and incompatible ideological visions of world order. By the late 1960s, Washington and Moscow recognized that unrestrained competition under nuclear parity had become unsustainable. The Cuban Missile Crisis served as a dramatic reminder of the catastrophic consequences inherent in miscalculation, pushing both sides toward negotiations designed to reduce the risk of accidental war. Détente was, in essence, the strategic institutionalization of coexistence: a tacit acknowledgment that rivalry could continue, but only within rules and structures that prevented escalation. It produced landmark agreements such as SALT I and the ABM Treaty, expanded diplomatic channels, and established regularized patterns of communication that helped stabilize the bipolar system.

However, détente was not a product of trust. Rather, it represented a pragmatic adaptation to structural constraints. The United States and the Soviet Union lacked meaningful economic interdependence; their relationship was primarily military and ideological. The absence of deep economic ties made détente a narrow form of stability management, confined largely to arms control and crisis communication. Even at its height, détente did not eliminate proxy conflicts or ideological hostility; instead, it imposed disciplined competition through predictable mechanisms and negotiated boundaries. Its eventual erosion in the late 1970s underscored both the fragility of trust and the endurance of systemic rivalry. By contrast, twenty-first-century U.S.–China relations operate within a vastly more interconnected and multifaceted global system. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is deeply embedded in international markets, global supply chains, and complex financial networks. Its rise was built not on isolation but on integration into the U.S.-led

liberal economic order. This creates a paradox at the center of contemporary rivalry: the United States and China are simultaneously economic partners and strategic competitors. Their interdependence moderates, but does not eliminate, the risks of conflict. Instead, it produces a new form of systemic vulnerability in which competition unfolds across domains that were largely absent during the Cold War—particularly advanced technologies, cyberspace, digital infrastructures, and economic leverage.

Technological rivalry has become the defining axis of U.S.–China competition. While nuclear deterrence remains a stabilizing factor, the strategic landscape is now shaped by competition in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, space capabilities, and 5G/6G communications. These technologies influence not only military balance but also global economic power and governance models. The militarization of supply chains, export controls, and critical technology dependencies introduces novel forms of coercive leverage that differ dramatically from Cold War dynamics. In this environment, stability depends not only on military deterrence but also on the resilience of technological ecosystems and the management of economic vulnerabilities.⁶ The regional context further complicates the U.S.–China rivalry. Whereas détente took place within a relatively stable set of spheres of influence, the Indo-Pacific is characterized by overlapping claims, alliance networks, and unresolved territorial disputes. Taiwan constitutes the most sensitive and dangerous flashpoint, where miscalculation or coercive escalation could trigger a major power conflict with global consequences. The South China Sea presents another arena in which territorial claims, naval modernization, and strategic signaling interact in unpredictable ways. Unlike Europe during the Cold War—where borders were effectively frozen—the Asia-Pacific remains fluid, contested, and vulnerable to rapid shifts in military posture. These dynamics limit the feasibility of a “clean détente” and suggest the need for more flexible crisis-management mechanisms tailored to regional complexity.

⁶Walt. 1987. The origins of alliances. Cornell University Press. <https://surl.li/pnifan>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

Despite these differences, significant parallels exist between Cold War détente and today's U.S.–China tension management. In both eras, great powers face the dilemma of how to compete without triggering catastrophic escalation. The recognition of mutual vulnerability, whether through nuclear parity or economic interdependence, creates incentives for the establishment of red lines and guardrails. Recent efforts by Washington and Beijing to institutionalize military hotlines, expand diplomatic dialogue, and create working groups on issues such as artificial intelligence and climate change reflect an implicit understanding of détente's logic: the need to introduce predictability into a volatile relationship.

Yet the analogy has limits. Cold War détente was possible in part because bipolarity simplified the strategic environment. The United States and the Soviet Union occupied clearly defined geopolitical and ideological positions, and their rivalry was mediated through relatively stable alliance structures. Today's international system is more fragmented. Middle powers such as India, Japan, Australia, and the European Union exert significant influence, shaping the contours of U.S.–China interactions. Their choices—whether through alignment, hedging, or strategic ambiguity—complicate efforts to establish a bilateral détente, introducing new layers of uncertainty. In addition, the ideological dimension of U.S.–China rivalry does not mirror the stark, doctrinal confrontation of the Cold War. While the United States continues to champion liberal democratic norms, and China promotes authoritarian state-capitalism and governance models grounded in sovereignty and digital control, the ideological competition is less overtly global than during the Cold War. Instead, it manifests through competing development models, digital governance standards, and institutional preferences for international order. This softer, more diffuse ideological competition both expands the arenas of rivalry and blurs the boundaries of geopolitical influence.

Economic interdependence represents the most substantial departure from the Cold War framework. Whereas U.S.–Soviet détente operated in an environment of economic separation, U.S.–China relations are characterized by asymmetric interdependence in

which each side depends on the other in different ways. For the United States, China remains a critical manufacturing hub and the world's second-largest economy. For China, the United States remains central in terms of advanced technologies, financial markets, and global consumption. This interdependence both restrains escalation and becomes a tool of competition, as illustrated by tariffs, sanctions, supply-chain restrictions, and the geopolitical contest surrounding critical minerals and semiconductor fabrication. Managing these tensions requires a form of détente that encompasses not only military signaling but also economic coordination and technological safeguards.⁷

Finally, the digital domain introduces new escalation pathways unknown in the Cold War. Cyber intrusions, disinformation, AI-driven operations, and threats to critical infrastructure create a strategic environment in which ambiguity, speed, and deniability complicate traditional deterrence. A modern détente must therefore include norms governing cyber behavior, crisis-communication mechanisms for digital incidents, and mutual restraint in targeting critical civilian infrastructures. Taken together, these factors demonstrate that although the conceptual foundation of détente—structured competition, crisis management, and mutual restraint—remains relevant, the mechanisms required for stability must adapt to the realities of twenty-first-century geopolitics. The U.S.–China rivalry demands a more flexible, multidimensional approach to tension management, one that accounts for economic entanglement, technological vulnerabilities, regional instability, and global governance contestation. A simple replication of Cold War détente is neither feasible nor desirable; instead, modern great-power management must be a dynamic framework capable of evolving alongside the rapidly shifting contours of global power.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Cold War détente and contemporary U.S.–China relations demonstrates that while the structural logic of great-power rivalry retains enduring

⁷ Al-auqaili. 2024. *How corporate-militant alliances are changing modern warfare. Foreign policy in focus.* <https://surl.li/rapvyp>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

features, the conditions under which such rivalry unfolds have transformed in profound and unprecedented ways. The Cold War experience provides valuable insights into how adversaries can construct mechanisms that reduce escalation risks, clarify strategic intentions, and impose limits on destabilizing behavior. Yet these historical analogies must be employed with caution: the institutional designs, geopolitical circumstances, and technological constraints that shaped U.S.–Soviet détente cannot be simply transplanted into the twenty-first-century environment. In the Cold War, détente functioned as a response to the existential dangers posed by nuclear parity. It rested on a shared recognition by the United States and the Soviet Union that unregulated confrontation threatened not only the global system but their own survival². This mutual vulnerability allowed both sides to institutionalize patterns of predictability through arms control, diplomatic engagement, and crisis-communication mechanisms. Although détente did not resolve ideological tensions or end geopolitical competition, it provided a framework through which rivalry could be managed without spiraling into direct conflict.

By contrast, U.S.–China relations operate within a far more complex and interconnected global landscape. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is deeply embedded in global markets, technological ecosystems, and transnational supply chains³. This economic and technological interdependence simultaneously moderates and complicates strategic competition, creating vulnerabilities that extend well beyond military domains. As a result, the challenge for modern great-power management is no longer limited to nuclear stability but encompasses cyber operations, AI-enabled conflict, economic coercion, supply-chain disruption, and contested governance over digital infrastructures⁴. These factors render contemporary rivalry multidimensional in ways that have no precise Cold War equivalent. The Indo-Pacific region further complicates the prospects for stability. Territorial disputes, shifting alliance dynamics, naval modernization, and the evolving military balance around Taiwan generate persistent uncertainties. Unlike the relatively static European frontiers of the Cold War, the Indo-Pacific is fluid, decentralized, and shaped by the independent strategic choices of numerous influential middle powers. These dynamics make it difficult

to design bilateral mechanisms that can reliably constrain escalation.⁸ Nevertheless, several core principles of détente remain relevant. Structured communication, recognition of red lines, mutual understanding of core interests, and the establishment of crisis-management protocols can help reduce misperceptions and prevent minor incidents from triggering broader confrontations. However, achieving these objectives today requires innovative adaptation rather than replication. A modern variant of détente would need to integrate technological governance, economic diplomacy, cyber norms, and transparency mechanisms tailored to digital-age risks⁶. It would also require institutional creativity to operate within a multipolar regional environment where the U.S.–China dyad no longer monopolizes strategic outcomes.⁹

Ultimately, the central insight of this study is that great-power rivalry can be managed, even if it cannot be eliminated. While the Cold War offers a conceptual template for stabilizing competition, its mechanisms must be reimagined in light of twenty-first-century realities. The United States and China face a choice: either allow unmanaged competition to intensify systemic vulnerability or construct new forms of strategic restraint capable of sustaining global stability. The stakes are immense. In a world defined by deep interdependence and rapid technological change, the absence of credible guardrails would not simply threaten bilateral relations—it would endanger the resilience of the international order itself⁷. A reconfigured, technologically informed, and institutionally flexible model of détente is therefore not merely desirable but necessary. Whether the United States and China can muster the political will, strategic imagination, and diplomatic commitment to pursue such a framework will shape the trajectory of global security for decades to come.

⁸ Mearsheimer. *The tragedy of great power politics*. 2001. <https://surl.li/ftxhoo>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

⁹ Gruszczak, kolascynski. *Understanding contemporary security: a prolegomenon to the interplay between technology, innovation and policy responses*. Politeja. 2022. <https://surl.li/klvpmd>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

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