

## Great Power Rivalry, Shared Responsibilities

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The coming year could prove consequential for China–U.S. relations. With multiple leader-level meetings expected, both sides will have a chance to stabilize ties. Yet most debates remain focused on trade disputes, technology controls, and regional crises. What is missing from these debates is just as important: global governance, where cooperation remains not only possible but necessary.

Many observers assume that such cooperation is no longer realistic. The prevailing view holds that the current U.S. administration approaches global governance in largely unilateral or transactional terms, leaving little space for sustained coordination with China on global governance. There is some truth in this assessment, but it is half the picture. Strategic competition has intensified, yet it has not eliminated the structural conditions that continue to make cooperation unavoidable.

The case for cooperation, in fact, proves more resilient than current debates suggest.

Global challenges are not receding; they are becoming more complex and more deeply interconnected. Climate change, pandemic risks, food insecurity, and the governance of emerging technologies all operate across borders and increasingly interact with one another. Recent crises, including instability in the Middle East and disruptions in global supply chains, have exposed the fragility of the international system. These are not problems that any single country, however powerful, can manage alone.

At the same time, China and the United States remain central to any meaningful response. Their combined economic weight, technological capabilities, and political influence ensure that many global initiatives cannot succeed without their participation. This is particularly evident in areas such as artificial intelligence, where both countries operate at the technological frontier and shape the direction of global development. Other states, including many in the Global South, continue to expect both Beijing and Washington to provide public goods and a degree of stability, even as they seek to avoid alignment with either side.

There is also a subtler dynamic at work. Despite persistent mistrust, both sides continue to hold implicit expectations of one another. Occasional U.S. references to a G2, however loosely defined, reflect an underlying recognition of shared responsibility. China, for its part, has consistently rejected any framework that implies spheres of influence, yet it has also emphasized that major powers should act commensurate with their capabilities. The disagreement is real, but narrower than it often appears. It concerns how cooperation should be framed, not whether it is necessary.

What emerges is a form of cooperation that is functional rather than ideological. It does not require alignment on values, nor does it depend on the revival of comprehensive engagement.

Instead, it rests on a more limited but durable premise: certain global risks cannot be effectively managed without at least some degree of parallel action by both sides.

The more difficult question is where such cooperation might begin.

One promising area, though still underdeveloped, lies at the intersection of artificial intelligence and nuclear. This domain illustrates both the scale of emerging risks and the possibility of incremental progress. Advances in AI are beginning to reshape the foundations of strategic stability. They accelerate decision-making processes, increase reliance on automated systems, and introduce new pathways for misperception or unintended escalation.

Against this backdrop, even limited areas of agreement take on greater significance. China and the United States have both affirmed a basic principle: decisions over nuclear weapons must remain under human control. This is a narrow point of convergence, but it is nonetheless meaningful in the current strategic environment.

A further step would be to extend this emerging consensus beyond the bilateral level. China and the United States could engage other nuclear states in shaping basic principles for the AI–nuclear nexus, particularly those related to human control and escalation risks. While neither side is likely to endorse a formal “G2” framework, such coordination would, in practice, position them as joint agenda-setters in a domain where global governance remains fragmented.

This approach would also serve both countries’ interests. China has consistently emphasized the role of major powers in providing leadership in global governance, while the United States, under the current administration, has an incentive to portray itself as favoring restraint and peace over open-ended confrontation. Cooperation in this area, therefore, reflects not only shared risks but also converging, although differently framed, strategic objectives.

The same logic extends beyond the AI–nuclear nexus. Climate governance stands as an obvious example, where past China–U.S. cooperation has had global effects. Public health, particularly in the context of pandemic preparedness, offers another area where coordination is both necessary and feasible. Even in more contested domains such as digital governance, there remains space for dialogue on risk management and technical standards, especially as fragmentation accelerates.

None of this implies a return to earlier phases of engagement. The broader relationship has changed, and competition will remain one of its features for the foreseeable future. Cooperation, where it occurs, will be selective and limited. Yet it does not need to be comprehensive to matter. In a fragmented international system, even narrow forms of coordination can have stabilizing effects.

This is the point that is often overlooked. Rivalry and interdependence are not mutually exclusive. They coexist, often uneasily, within the same relationship.

China–U.S. relations are entering a more contested phase, but both countries remain central to the functioning of the global system. Their actions, or their failure to act, will continue to shape



global outcomes. In this sense, global governance is not a secondary concern. It is a structural necessity.

The anticipated summit will not resolve the deeper tensions between Beijing and Washington. Nor should that be the expectation. What they can do, however, is create space for more pragmatic engagement, not through sweeping agreements, but through targeted, issue-specific cooperation.

That may seem modest, particularly in the context of intensifying rivalry. But in a period of growing uncertainty, such modest steps may prove both realistic and indispensable for providing global stability.