Beyond the Thucydides Trap

A Life-Coherent Civilizational Framework for Great-Power Rivalry, Strategic Stability, and Planetary Repair

From Fear-Based Order to Relational Security in the U.S.–China Century

Dr. Bichara Sahely, BSc (Biology), MBBS, DM (Internal Medicine)

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Abstract

The public invocation of the "Thucydides Trap" during the May 2026 Beijing summit between Chinese President Xi Jinping and United States President Donald J. Trump marked more than a rhetorical moment in great-power diplomacy. It brought into the open an ancient warning about power transition, fear, status injury, misrecognition, and catastrophic war. In conventional strategic theory, the Thucydides Trap names the danger that arises when a rising power threatens to displace an established one. Yet this white paper argues that the deeper trap is not merely the structural rivalry between China and the United States. The deeper trap is a life-blind security paradigm in which states seek safety through the insecurity of others.

Using the U.S.–China rivalry as a civilizational stress test, this paper reframes the Thucydides Trap as a diagnostic rather than a destiny. It distinguishes warning from fatalism, strategic stability from peace, peer recognition from domination, deterrence from relational security, interdependence from hostage-dependence, and national interest from planetary life-interest. It argues that "constructive strategic stability," while necessary, remains insufficient unless deepened into a wider architecture of life-coherent strategic stability: crisis non-escalation, Taiwan life-protection, civil commons resilience, technology under life-protective constraint, and planetary repair diplomacy.

The central claim is that humanity will not escape the Thucydides Trap merely by balancing power more skillfully. It must bring forth another world of understanding: one in which security is defined not as the capacity to defeat threat, but as the shared capacity to preserve and regenerate the conditions of life under difference, uncertainty, and conflict.

Keywords

Thucydides Trap, U.S.–China relations, great-power rivalry, strategic stability, life-coherent security, Taiwan, planetary repair, relational security, civil commons, deterrence, peace theory, structural violence, autopoiesis, life-value ontology, geopolitical risk, technology governance, civilizational stress test

Executive Summary

The May 2026 Beijing summit between Chinese President Xi Jinping and United States President Donald J. Trump placed the Thucydides Trap at the center of contemporary geopolitical discourse. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that Xi asked whether China and the United States could overcome the Thucydides Trap, establish a new paradigm of major-country relations, meet global challenges together, and build a brighter future for both peoples and humanity. The same official framing presented "constructive strategic stability" as a new vision for China-U.S. relations (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).

This white paper argues that the significance of the moment lies not only in the invocation of Thucydides, but in what the invocation reveals. The Thucydides Trap is usually understood as a geopolitical warning about the danger that arises when a rising power challenges an established one. Graham Allison's influential formulation has made this framework central to debates about whether China and the United States can avoid great-power war; Harvard Kennedy School's summary of Allison's work emphasizes both the danger of the pattern and Allison's insistence that war is not inevitable (Allison, 2017; Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, n.d.).

The deeper danger, however, is civilizational. The U.S.–China rivalry reveals a world order still organized around fear, status anxiety, military deterrence, technological supremacy, coercive interdependence, fossil-energy vulnerability, and national narratives of humiliation or decline. In such a field, each side's attempt to increase its own margin of safety may decrease the perceived margin of safety of the other. Defensive moves appear aggressive. Technological innovation becomes militarized. Trade becomes leverage. Sovereignty becomes possession. Historical analogy risks becoming destiny.

The true trap is not simply China rising and America fearing. The true trap is a life-blind security paradigm in which the security of one power is pursued through the insecurity of another.

Taiwan represents the most acute flashpoint. Official Chinese statements identified Taiwan as the most important issue in China-U.S. relations, while Reuters reported that Trump said he discussed U.S. arms sales to Taiwan with Xi and had made no commitment either way (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a; Hunnicutt & Chu, 2026). Yet a life-coherent framework insists that Taiwan must not be reduced to a red line, bargaining chip, alliance test, semiconductor node, or strategic trigger. Taiwan is a living society composed of people, families, institutions, histories, cultures, ecosystems, and future generations. Any policy that treats Taiwan as expendable has already failed the life-coherence test.

The paper therefore proposes a framework of **life-coherent strategic stability**. This framework does not reject strategic stability. It deepens it. Conventional strategic stability

seeks to prevent uncontrolled escalation between rival powers. Life-coherent strategic stability asks whether the conditions generating escalation are also being repaired. It includes five pillars: crisis non-escalation, Taiwan life-protection, civil commons resilience, technology under life-protective constraint, and planetary repair diplomacy.

The paper concludes that the Thucydides Trap can be transcended only if it is treated as a warning rather than a prophecy. The question is not simply whether China rises or America declines. The deeper question is whether humanity can move beyond a fear-based order before fear becomes self-fulfilling.

The central thesis is therefore:

The highest realism is no longer domination, but viability. Security is legitimate only when it remains answerable to life.

Preface

This white paper was written in response to a moment when an ancient warning entered the living field of twenty-first-century diplomacy. The Thucydides Trap is often discussed as a matter of strategy: a rising power, a ruling power, structural fear, and the danger of war. But beneath that strategic pattern lies a deeper civilizational question. What kind of world do human beings bring forth when fear becomes the organizing principle of order?

The answer matters because the U.S.–China rivalry is not only a bilateral dispute. It is entangled with Taiwan, nuclear weapons, artificial intelligence, energy chokepoints, food systems, public health, climate instability, ecological breakdown, supply chains, domestic nationalism, and the fate of smaller societies caught between larger powers. It is therefore not enough to ask whether two great powers can avoid war. We must ask whether civilization can learn to organize security around life rather than domination.

This paper draws on the language of strategic studies, peace research, autopoiesis, life-value ontology, commons governance, and civilizational repair. Its purpose is not to deny the reality of danger. It is to deepen realism to the level of the life-ground. Power matters. Deterrence matters. Sovereignty matters. But none of these is ultimate. Air, water, soil, climate, bodies, care, food systems, public health, social trust, and future generations are prior.

The task before us is therefore one of discernment and repair. We must discern where warning becomes fatalism, where stability is mistaken for peace, where interdependence becomes hostage-dependence, where technology becomes supremacy without wisdom, and where living societies are reduced to strategic abstractions. We must repair the conditions that make rivalry appear inevitable.

The Thucydides Trap asks whether a rising power and a ruling power can avoid catastrophic war.

The life-coherent question is deeper:

Can civilization bring forth a world in which no people's safety depends upon another people's fear?

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The author also acknowledges the use of ChatGPT as a drafting, editorial, and synthesis assistant in developing, polishing, and organizing the manuscript. The responsibility for the final argument, judgement, and publication rests with the author.

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1. Introduction. A Warning at the Edge of History

There are moments when history does not merely repeat itself; it asks whether it must. The public invocation of the Thucydides Trap during the May 2026 Beijing summit between Chinese President Xi Jinping and United States President Donald J. Trump was such a moment. It brought into the open an ancient warning about rivalry, fear, status injury, misrecognition, and catastrophic war. More importantly, it placed before the world a question that cannot be answered by strategy alone: can great powers recognize a destructive historical pattern before they become governed by it?

The official Chinese account framed the summit as a moment of high historical consequence. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xi asked whether China and the United States could overcome the Thucydides Trap, establish a new paradigm of major-country relations, meet global challenges together, and build a brighter future in the interest of both peoples and humanity. The same statement reported that Xi and Trump agreed on a new vision of building a "constructive China-U.S. relationship of strategic stability," intended to provide guidance for bilateral relations over the following years (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).

This formulation matters because it does not merely ask whether two governments can avoid war. It asks whether two civilizational-scale systems can change the way they perceive, regulate, and respond to each other under conditions of fear. It asks whether rivalry can remain bounded before it becomes destiny. It asks whether a world order still organized around domination, deterrence, technological supremacy, and coercive interdependence can learn to become answerable to life.

In its conventional meaning, the Thucydides Trap names the danger that arises when a rising power threatens to displace an established one. Graham Allison popularized the phrase to describe the structural stress that often emerges when shifts in relative power generate fear, miscalculation, and war-risk between major powers. The Harvard Belfer Center's Thucydides Trap case file summarizes Allison's central claim: in 12 of 16 historical cases involving a rising power challenging a ruling power, the outcome was war, while four avoided it (Allison, 2017; Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, n.d.).

Yet this conventional interpretation does not go far enough. It remains too easily confined within the grammar it seeks to analyze. It treats great powers as the primary actors, national security as the primary concern, strategic equilibrium as the primary goal, and war avoidance as the primary definition of peace. These categories are necessary, but they are not sufficient for the historical moment now before us.

The deeper danger is civilizational. The U.S.–China rivalry is not only a contest between two states. It is a stress test of the dominant world order itself: an order that has too often

organized security around threat, economics around leverage, technology around supremacy, sovereignty around possession, and progress around power accumulation. In such a world, each side's attempt to increase its own margin of safety may decrease the perceived margin of safety of the other. Defensive action becomes provocation. Strategic ambiguity becomes suspicion. Technological development becomes militarized. Domestic nationalism narrows diplomatic possibility. The future becomes governed by the anticipation of betrayal.

This is the deeper Thucydides Trap: not simply the rise of one power and the fear of another, but the inability of a civilization to imagine security except through rivalry.

The Taiwan question reveals this danger with exceptional clarity. In the official Chinese readout, Xi described Taiwan as the most important issue in China-U.S. relations and warned that mishandling it could lead to clashes or even conflict, placing the wider relationship in jeopardy (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). Reuters reported that Trump said he had discussed U.S. arms sales to Taiwan with Xi, had made no commitment either way, and would decide soon on future sales (Hunnicutt & Chu, 2026).

Taiwan is therefore not simply a policy issue. It is the condensed site where sovereignty, deterrence, national identity, historical grievance, democratic self-governance, alliance credibility, semiconductor dependence, and military signaling converge. Precisely because of this, Taiwan must not be reduced to a strategic abstraction. Taiwan is not merely a red line, bargaining chip, island-chain node, credibility test, or trigger. Taiwan is a living society composed of persons, families, institutions, histories, cultures, ecosystems, livelihoods, and future generations. To treat Taiwan only as an object of strategic calculation is already to participate in the abstraction that makes catastrophe more thinkable.

The same pattern applies to energy, trade, artificial intelligence, public health, ecological stability, and global supply chains. The Guardian reported that the Beijing summit produced limited concrete breakthroughs on Iran, Taiwan, or AI, despite its symbolic emphasis on stability and bilateral reset. Channel NewsAsia similarly interpreted "constructive strategic stability" as a new positioning in Sino-U.S. relations that seeks to stabilize rivalry without eliminating it (Channel NewsAsia, 2026; Hawkins & Smith, 2026).

This is precisely the point. The rivalry is not contained within diplomacy. It is coupled to energy chokepoints, supply chains, domestic political pressures, military doctrines, ecological vulnerabilities, digital infrastructures, and the global economy. The relevant unit of analysis is therefore not merely the state, nor even the bilateral relationship. It is the relational field: the whole pattern of constraints, perceptions, material dependencies, symbolic injuries, institutional pathways, and ecological consequences through which states bring forth their worlds.

The issue, then, is not whether the Thucydides analogy is perfectly accurate. No analogy can bear the full weight of history. The issue is whether the warning can be transformed

into discernment. The ancient story must not become a prophecy. It must become a diagnostic.

This distinction is decisive. A prophecy closes the future by assigning roles in advance: rising power, ruling power, inevitable rivalry, eventual war. A diagnostic opens the future by revealing where the system is losing viability and where repair remains possible. The task of this white paper is therefore not to rehearse the inevitability of great-power war, but to ask what kind of world is being brought forth when fear becomes the organizing principle of order.

The paper argues that the true trap is not simply China rising and America fearing. The true trap is a life-blind security paradigm in which the safety of one is pursued through the insecurity of another. In that paradigm, peace becomes the temporary absence of open war; stability becomes the management of rivalry; interdependence becomes hostage-dependence; technology becomes supremacy without wisdom; and national interest becomes detached from the planetary life-ground that makes any nation's future possible.

Against this life-blind paradigm, this paper proposes a life-coherent framework for great-power rivalry, strategic stability, and planetary repair. It draws on strategic studies, peace research, autopoiesis, life-value ontology, commons governance, and civilizational repair to argue that security must be redefined. Security is not ultimately the capacity to dominate threat. It is the shared capacity to preserve and regenerate the conditions of life under difference, uncertainty, and conflict.

This requires a shift from strategic stability alone to life-coherent strategic stability. Strategic stability seeks to prevent uncontrolled escalation between rival powers. Life-coherent strategic stability asks a deeper question: are the conditions that generate escalation being repaired? This includes crisis non-escalation, Taiwan life-protection, civil commons resilience, technology under life-protective constraint, and planetary repair diplomacy.

The guiding question of the paper is therefore:

What must be discerned, and what must be repaired, if humanity is to avoid bringing forth a world in which fear becomes fate?

The answer begins with a simple but demanding distinction: the highest realism is no longer domination, but viability. Power matters. Deterrence matters. Sovereignty matters. But none of these is ultimate. Air, water, soil, climate, food systems, public health, civil commons, social trust, and future generations are prior. Security remains legitimate only when it remains answerable to life.

2. The Thucydides Trap as Diagnosis, Not Destiny

The first distinction required is between warning and destiny. The Thucydides Trap is useful only if it awakens responsibility. It becomes dangerous when it induces fatalism.

In its familiar contemporary usage, the Thucydides Trap refers to the structural danger that may arise when a rising power threatens to displace an established one. The phrase was popularized by Graham Allison to interpret the historical pattern through which shifts in relative power can produce fear, miscalculation, and war-risk between major powers. Allison and the Harvard Belfer Center's Thucydides Trap Project identify 16 historical cases in which a rising power challenged a ruling power over the past five centuries, 12 of which ended in war (Allison, 2017; Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, n.d.).

The value of the framework is that it makes fear analytically visible. It shows that war may arise not only from deliberate aggression, but from misrecognition, insecurity, alliance rigidity, domestic pressure, status anxiety, and mutually reinforcing threat perception. In such a field, each side may experience itself as defensive while interpreting the other as aggressive. The rising power seeks recognition and room for development; the established power fears loss of position, credibility, and control. The structure does not mechanically cause war, but it can narrow imagination until war begins to appear necessary.

This narrowing of imagination is the deeper danger. If leaders accept the Thucydides Trap as fate, they begin to inhabit the roles it assigns. China becomes "the rising power." The United States becomes "the ruling power." Taiwan becomes "the flashpoint." The Indo-Pacific becomes "the theatre." Technology becomes "the arms race." Diplomacy becomes "the pause before conflict." At that point, the analogy no longer merely describes a risk; it becomes part of the symbolic machinery through which risk is produced.

For this reason, the Thucydides Trap must be treated as a diagnostic, not a prophecy. A prophecy closes the future by assigning roles in advance. A diagnostic opens the future by disclosing where a system is losing viability and where repair remains possible. The difference is decisive. Warning generates responsibility. Fatalism generates enactment.

The May 2026 summit is significant precisely because the official Chinese framing presented the Thucydides Trap as a question rather than a verdict. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xi asked whether China and the United States could overcome the Thucydides Trap, establish a new paradigm of major-country relations, meet global challenges together, and build a brighter future for both peoples and humanity. The same statement described an agreed vision of a "constructive China-U.S. relationship of strategic stability," defined as cooperation as the mainstay, competition within proper limits, manageable differences, and expectable peace (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).

This language matters, but it must be held critically. To ask whether the trap can be overcome is not yet to overcome it. A declared "new paradigm" may reduce danger, or it may stabilize rivalry under a new vocabulary. "Constructive strategic stability" may provide necessary guardrails, but guardrails are not the same as repair. They may prevent immediate collision while leaving intact the road that continually produces collision-risk.

This is why strategic stability must be distinguished from peace. Strategic stability asks how rival powers can avoid uncontrolled escalation. It is indispensable in a world of nuclear weapons, cyber vulnerabilities, AI-enabled systems, maritime flashpoints, sanctions regimes, and competing nationalisms. Without channels of communication, crisis protocols, military-to-military contact, and diplomatic restraint, the risk of miscalculation grows intolerably high.

But strategic stability is not peace.

Strategic stability can coexist with arms races, coercive interdependence, ecological destruction, economic warfare, proxy conflict, surveillance expansion, technological militarization, and the subordination of smaller societies to great-power bargaining. It can maintain a floor beneath rivalry without transforming rivalry's causes. It can prevent war while continuing to organize the world around fear.

Channel NewsAsia's analysis of the summit captured this ambiguity. It reported that "constructive strategic stability" was presented as a new positioning for Sino-U.S. ties, but analysts interpreted it less as an end to strategic competition than as an effort by Beijing to define the boundaries within which competition should unfold. The Chinese formulation, in that reading, seeks to keep rivalry controlled, sustained, and less likely to spiral into crisis (Channel NewsAsia, 2026).

That is useful, but insufficient. Controlled rivalry is not yet life-coherent peace. A rivalry can be disciplined and still life-draining. It can avoid open war while diverting resources from health systems, climate adaptation, education, ecological restoration, public knowledge, food security, and poverty reduction. It can maintain order while deepening structural violence. It can protect national prestige while degrading the civil commons on which populations depend.

Life-coherent peace asks a deeper question: are the conditions that generate rivalry being repaired?

That question changes the frame. It shifts analysis from the balance of power to the balance of viability. It asks not only whether the United States and China can avoid war, but whether their relationship enables or disables the life-supporting conditions of the wider world. It asks whether Taiwan is protected as a living society rather than treated as a trigger. It asks whether technological competition is governed by life-protective constraint. It asks whether interdependence becomes resilient reciprocity or hostage-dependence. It asks whether the planet's ecological foundations are placed beneath, or above, the demands of national prestige.

A life-coherent interpretation therefore refuses both naïveté and fatalism. It does not deny danger. It does not pretend that goodwill can dissolve structural rivalry. It does not ignore Taiwan, cyber conflict, maritime disputes, ideological difference, military modernization, coercive economic tools, or technological competition. But it also refuses to make rivalry ultimate. Power is real, but life is prior. Strategy is necessary, but not sovereign. Security is indispensable, but it must be judged by whether it preserves or endangers the conditions of life.

The Thucydides Trap, properly understood, is therefore not the final theory of U.S.–China relations. It is an alarm bell. The question is whether the alarm awakens repair or merely intensifies fear.

The civilizational task is not to escape history by ignoring its warnings. It is to hear the warning without becoming imprisoned by it. History offers patterns, not commandments. The past can illuminate danger, but it cannot absolve the present of responsibility. To invoke Thucydides responsibly is to say: we recognize the pattern, and therefore we refuse to be governed by it.

3. The Deeper Trap: Life-Blind Security

The deeper trap is not that China rises and the United States fears. The deeper trap is that the prevailing grammar of world order still defines security in life-blind terms.

Life-blind security is security abstracted from the living conditions it is meant to protect. It measures safety by military capability, technological superiority, alliance reach, economic leverage, deterrent credibility, and control over strategic chokepoints, but often fails to ask whether these instruments preserve or damage the life-ground. It can protect borders while neglecting bodies. It can secure supply chains while degrading ecosystems. It can defend national prestige while weakening public health, social trust, and planetary stability. It can avoid open war while sustaining structural violence.

This is why the U.S.–China rivalry has such civilizational significance. It is not merely a bilateral contest. It is a test of whether the most powerful systems on Earth can reimagine security before their rivalry disables planetary repair. The rivalry unfolds at the same historical moment when humanity must coordinate around climate instability, ocean degradation, biodiversity loss, pandemic risk, food insecurity, nuclear danger, artificial intelligence, debt distress, and mass displacement. If the two largest powers organize the century around fear, the entire planet will pay the cost.

The May 2026 summit illustrates this compression of danger. The official Chinese readout placed the Thucydides question, strategic stability, economic ties, communication channels, Taiwan, the Middle East, Ukraine, and the Korean Peninsula in the same diplomatic frame. Xi's statement described the international situation as "fluid and turbulent," called for a new paradigm in China-U.S. relations, and defined "constructive strategic stability" through cooperation, bounded competition, manageable differences, and expectable peace. It also identified Taiwan as the most important issue in China-U.S. relations and warned that mishandling it could produce clashes or conflicts (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).

Independent reporting confirms that the summit did not occur in a clean bilateral vacuum. The Guardian described the meeting as rich in pageantry and promises of stability but limited in tangible progress on Iran, Taiwan, or the AI arms race. It also reported that the Strait of Hormuz and China's energy exposure formed part of the geopolitical background, with Trump saying the two leaders wanted the strait open while questions remained over Beijing's willingness to pressure Tehran (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). Reuters similarly reported that Trump said Xi had agreed Tehran must reopen the Strait of Hormuz, while China did not publicly confirm such a commitment and instead criticized the war as one that should not have happened (Hunnicutt & Choukeir, 2026).

The relevant unit of analysis is not simply the state. It is the relational field: the whole pattern of perceptions, constraints, material dependencies, symbolic injuries, historical

memories, institutional pathways, and ecological consequences through which states enact their security.

The field is dangerous because each side can tell a plausible defensive story about itself.

China can say that it seeks recognition, development space, national rejuvenation, territorial integrity, protection from encirclement, and an end to an unequal order in which Western powers long dictated the terms of legitimacy.

The United States can say that it seeks deterrence, alliance protection, a free and open Indo-Pacific, support for Taiwan's self-governing society, technological security, and resistance to coercive revisionism.

Both stories contain partial truths. Both also conceal dangers. China's language of national rejuvenation can become coercive when it treats Taiwan's living society as subordinate to historical destiny. America's language of rules-based order can become hypocritical when it ignores its own history of selective legality, military intervention, coercive hierarchy, and economic pressure. China's critique of containment can obscure the fear generated by its military pressure. America's critique of authoritarian expansion can obscure the insecurity generated by its own global military posture.

The task is not to choose one self-justifying narrative over the other. The task is to disclose the relational pattern that both are co-producing, though not symmetrically, not innocently, and not with identical responsibilities.

In that pattern, the central pathology is not difference. Difference is not the enemy. Civilizations, political systems, economies, cultures, and historical memories will differ. The pathology is the conversion of difference into existential threat. Once difference becomes existentialized, every disagreement becomes a precursor to war. Every technological gain becomes a strategic emergency. Every diplomatic ambiguity becomes betrayal. Every domestic political concession becomes weakness. The field loses margin.

This is the logic of life-blind security. It begins with a legitimate need for protection, but then abstracts protection from the living reality it is meant to serve. Security becomes domination. Peace becomes temporary non-war. Economy becomes leverage. Technology becomes supremacy. Sovereignty becomes absolute possession. Interdependence becomes hostage-dependence. The other becomes an existential problem to be managed, deterred, contained, or defeated.

A life-coherent security paradigm begins elsewhere. It begins with the recognition that no state can secure itself by destabilizing the living conditions of the wider Earth community. It recognizes that the life-ground is prior to the state system: air, water, soil, climate, oceans, biodiversity, bodies, care, food systems, health systems, public knowledge, social trust, and future generations. These are not soft issues. They are the real foundations of security.

This does not mean that military security is irrelevant. In a world where coercion, invasion, blockade, nuclear weapons, cyberattack, and authoritarian pressure exist, deterrence may be tragically necessary. But deterrence cannot become the highest truth. If deterrence is not subordinated to de-escalation, relational repair, and life-protective limits, it can become a permanent machinery of fear. It may prevent immediate attack while reproducing the conditions of future catastrophe.

The same applies to economic interdependence. Trade can build mutual benefit, but it can also become coercive dependence. Supply chains can connect societies, but they can also make them vulnerable to sanctions, blockades, extraction, and disruption. Energy systems can support prosperity, but when built around chokepoints and fossil vulnerability, they can convert regional conflict into global hardship. Technology can expand human possibility, but when organized around supremacy, surveillance, autonomous violence, and decision compression, it can reduce the margin available for wisdom.

Thus the deeper repair is not merely diplomatic. It is civilizational. The world must move from security as the management of threat to security as the preservation of life-capacity. This requires reordering the relationship between power and life. Power must become instrumental. Life must become criterial.

In a life-coherent framework, the central question is no longer simply: What protects the state?

The deeper question is:

What preserves, restores, and expands the conditions of life for all affected by the state's actions?

This question does not abolish strategic reasoning. It disciplines it. It asks whether deterrence protects or endangers life. It asks whether alliances stabilize or escalate. It asks whether technology serves flourishing or domination. It asks whether trade builds resilient reciprocity or mutual hostage-taking. It asks whether Taiwan is being protected as a living society or abstracted into a strategic object. It asks whether the planet's life-support systems are being treated as prior conditions or expendable background.

From this perspective, the highest realism is not domination. The highest realism is viability.

4. The Civilizational Stress Test

If the Thucydides Trap is treated only as a geopolitical analogy, it remains too narrow. It names the danger of power transition, but not the deeper question of whether the relational field itself is becoming more or less viable. The U.S.–China rivalry must therefore be read not only as a strategic competition, but as a civilizational stress test.

A stress test asks how a system behaves under pressure. It asks where constraints harden, where margin thins, where perception distorts, where regulation fails, and where options narrow. In financial systems, stress tests reveal hidden fragility before collapse. In medicine, stress tests reveal physiological limits before crisis. In civilization, stress tests reveal whether a society, region, or world order can preserve life-capacity under disturbance.

The May 2026 summit offers such a test because it compressed multiple danger fields into one diplomatic moment: the Thucydides warning, Taiwan, AI competition, trade friction, Iran and the Strait of Hormuz, Ukraine, the Korean Peninsula, and the attempt to define a new relationship of "constructive strategic stability." The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs placed these issues within a single frame of strategic stability and global turbulence, while press reporting emphasized that the summit produced limited concrete breakthroughs on Iran, Taiwan, or AI (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a; Hawkins & Smith, 2026).

This section applies the seven primitives of viability — Constraint, Margin, State, Disturbance, Perception, Regulation, and Options — to the U.S.–China rivalry. The purpose is not to predict war. It is to identify where repair is needed before the system loses the capacity to regulate itself.

4.1 Constraint

Every field of action is shaped by constraint. In the U.S.–China rivalry, the most visible constraints are military, technological, economic, and symbolic.

The military constraints include nuclear weapons, the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, alliance commitments, maritime encounters, missile systems, airspace incidents, and command-and-control risks. The technological constraints include semiconductors, artificial intelligence, cyber infrastructure, satellites, surveillance systems, rare earths, autonomous weapons, and export controls. The economic constraints include trade dependence, debt exposure, supply-chain concentration, energy chokepoints, and sanctions vulnerability. The symbolic constraints include historical humiliation, national rejuvenation, American primacy, alliance credibility, democratic identity, sovereignty claims, and domestic narratives of strength or betrayal.

Constraint does not determine outcome. But it narrows the field. The more sacred, militarized, or identity-laden a constraint becomes, the harder it is to negotiate without humiliation. Taiwan is the clearest example. The Chinese official readout identified Taiwan as the most important issue in China-U.S. relations, while Reuters reported that Trump discussed Taiwan arms sales with Xi and had not yet decided whether to proceed with future sales (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a; Hunnicutt & Chu, 2026).

A life-coherent framework asks: which constraints are material, which are symbolic, which are self-imposed, and which can be softened without sacrificing life? The repair begins by distinguishing real security needs from prestige demands masquerading as necessity.

4.2 Margin

Margin is the space between disturbance and breakdown. In geopolitics, margin includes trust, communication, decision time, diplomatic channels, supply-chain buffers, social resilience, domestic political flexibility, and the availability of face-saving off-ramps.

The current U.S.–China field has thin margin. Trust is low. Domestic politics reward toughness. Military platforms operate near one another. Technology compresses decision time. Supply chains are deeply interdependent but fragile. Taiwan remains highly symbolized. The Strait of Hormuz crisis shows how energy shocks can rapidly become global economic and diplomatic pressure points; Reuters reported that Trump said Xi agreed Iran must reopen the strait, while China did not publicly confirm that commitment and instead criticized the war itself (Hunnicutt & Choukeir, 2026).

Thin margin does not make war inevitable. But it makes the system vulnerable to cascading error. A naval collision, cyber incident, AI misclassification, blockade signal, sanctions retaliation, or domestic political shock could be interpreted through an already fearful frame. When margin is thin, perception hardens quickly.

The life-coherent repair is to increase margin deliberately: tested hotlines, crisis simulations, maritime encounter rules, cyber deconfliction, AI safety protocols, public rhetoric restraint, supply-chain redundancy, and diplomatic off-ramps that allow leaders to step back without appearing defeated.

4.3 State

The current state of the U.S.–China relationship is neither peace nor war. It is a high-arousal rivalry under partial regulation.

This matters because language can mislead. A summit may produce pageantry, personal rapport, optimistic statements, and declarations of stability, yet the underlying field may remain tense. The Guardian described the Beijing summit as high in symbolism but limited in tangible breakthroughs, especially on Iran, Taiwan, and AI (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). Channel NewsAsia reported that “constructive strategic stability” was presented as a new positioning for Sino-U.S. ties, but it also interpreted the phrase as an attempt to define and manage competition rather than end it (Channel NewsAsia, 2026).

A life-coherent reading therefore distinguishes diplomatic atmosphere from systemic condition. The state of the system is not defined by whether leaders speak warmly. It is defined by whether the relationship is increasing or decreasing life-system risk.

The present state can be described as managed instability: a rivalry that recognizes the danger of escalation but has not yet repaired the conditions that generate escalation. This is better than unmanaged hostility, but it is not yet life-coherent peace.

4.4 Disturbance

A disturbance is any shock that tests the field's capacity to regulate itself. In the U.S.–China rivalry, possible disturbances include a Taiwan Strait crisis, maritime collision, aircraft incident, cyberattack, AI-enabled command error, semiconductor sanctions spiral, energy shock, financial panic, domestic political crisis, third-region war, or sudden leadership miscalculation.

The danger is not only the disturbance itself. The danger is how the disturbance is interpreted.

If perception is already organized around suspicion, a local event can become proof of hostile intent. If domestic politics reward escalation, leaders may lose room to de-escalate. If communication channels fail, uncertainty fills the gap. If alliances react automatically, a bilateral shock can become regional. If financial and energy systems are brittle, geopolitical disturbances become social hardship.

The Iran/Hormuz context is instructive because it shows how a regional war and energy chokepoint can enter the U.S.–China field even when the primary conflict is elsewhere. The Guardian reported that the summit did not resolve the Iran question and that the Strait of Hormuz remained central because of its importance to global energy flows (Hawkins & Smith, 2026).

A life-coherent system would prepare for disturbances before they occur. It would ask: what could go wrong, how would each side interpret it, who can verify what happened, who can communicate first, and what off-ramp exists before public pride hardens?

4.5 Perception

Perception is not secondary to power. It is part of power.

Each side can experience itself as defensive and the other as aggressive. China may perceive U.S. alliances, Taiwan arms sales, export controls, military posture, and technology restrictions as containment. The United States may perceive Chinese military pressure, Taiwan rhetoric, regional assertiveness, cyber capabilities, and industrial policy as revisionist threat. Both perceptions contain partial evidence. Both can also become self-confirming.

This is the classic security dilemma, but at civilizational scale. Each side's effort to secure itself reduces the perceived security of the other. Defensive acts are read as offensive preparations. Ambiguity becomes hostile intent. Restraint becomes weakness. Dialogue becomes tactical delay. The field begins to see only what confirms fear.

This is where the Thucydides frame can either help or harm. It helps if it reveals the danger of fear. It harms if it teaches both sides to interpret the other through a fatalistic script. The Belfer Center's case file emphasizes that Allison's historical cases include both wars and avoided wars, which is crucial: the pattern is dangerous, but not deterministic (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, n.d.).

A life-coherent framework therefore treats perception as a repair site. It asks not only what each actor is doing, but what each actor believes the other is doing and why. It seeks transparency where possible, ambiguity only where necessary, and restraint in symbolic language that converts difference into existential threat.

4.6 Regulation

Regulation refers to the mechanisms that keep a system from crossing thresholds of breakdown. In great-power relations, regulation includes summits, hotlines, embassies, military-to-military channels, arms-control talks, trade consultations, crisis protocols, international law, regional institutions, Track Two dialogues, and civil society networks.

The emerging language of "constructive strategic stability" is a regulatory proposal. It seeks to place a floor under rivalry. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the concept includes cooperation, competition within proper limits, manageable differences, and expectable peace (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). That is a meaningful step if it creates real channels, restraint, and predictability.

But regulation can be too thin, too elite-centered, or too reactive. It may manage crises without repairing their causes. It may stabilize great-power rivalry while leaving smaller societies vulnerable. It may preserve trade while ignoring ecological limits. It may prevent direct war while enabling proxy violence, economic coercion, or technological arms racing.

Life-coherent regulation must therefore be wider. It must include not only military and diplomatic guardrails, but civil commons protection, Taiwan life-protection, AI and cyber constraints, public health cooperation, energy resilience, ecological repair, and mechanisms that protect smaller societies from being reduced to bargaining objects.

4.7 Options

The final primitive is Options. A system becomes dangerous when it convinces itself that only a few futures remain.

The visible options in the U.S.–China field include unmanaged escalation, hard decoupling, spheres of influence, transactional détente, managed rivalry, and life-coherent repair. The first risks catastrophe. The second may reduce some dependencies

but generate new blocs, scarcity, and suspicion. The third sacrifices smaller societies to great-power order. The fourth may buy time without altering the underlying field. The fifth may reduce immediate danger but leave the grammar of rivalry intact.

Only life-coherent repair changes the question.

It asks not: how can one side prevail?

It asks: what relational order allows peoples, ecosystems, institutions, and future generations to remain viable under conditions of enduring difference?

This does not remove conflict. It reorders conflict under the discipline of life. It asks whether deterrence is subordinated to de-escalation, whether Taiwan is protected as a living society, whether technology is governed by life-protective constraints, whether civil commons are resilient, and whether planetary repair remains possible despite rivalry.

Table 1. The Thucydides Trap as a Seven-Primitive Civilizational Stress Test

Viability primitive	**Great-power expression**	**Current danger**	**Life-coherent repair**
Constraint	Nuclear weapons, Taiwan, AI systems, energy chokepoints, alliances, domestic nationalism	Reduced flexibility; high symbolic stakes	Mutual restraint, crisis protocols, life-ground priorities
Margin	Trust, communication, slack, decision time, supply-chain buffers	Thin crisis margin; rapid escalation risk	Hotlines, redundancy, off-ramps, civil commons resilience
State	High-arousal rivalry below the threshold of war	Neither peace nor war; unstable competition	Disciplined coexistence and life-protective regulation
Disturbance	Taiwan incident, cyberattack, energy shock, sanctions spiral, maritime collision	Local shock becomes systemic crisis	Early warning, verification, deconfliction, mediation
Perception	Each side sees itself as defensive and the other as aggressive	Security dilemma becomes self-confirming	Perspective-taking, transparency, restraint in signaling

Viability primitive	Great-power expression	Current danger	Life-coherent repair
Regulation	Summits, trade talks, military channels, strategic stability language	Elite guardrails may be insufficient	Multi-level regulation tied to life-protective outcomes
Options	War, decoupling, spheres of influence, transactional détente, repair	Narrowed imagination under fear	Life-coherent strategic stability and planetary repair diplomacy

The stress test shows that the danger is not located in one variable alone. It is not only Taiwan, not only AI, not only energy, not only nationalism, not only alliance structure, not only China's rise, and not only America's fear. The danger lies in the coupling of all these elements within a field of thin margin, distorted perception, fragile regulation, and narrowing options.

This is why repair must begin with discernment. The next section therefore names the distinctions that must be made if the Thucydides Trap is to become a doorway into civilizational metanoia rather than a script for catastrophe.

5. Necessary Distinctions for Discernment

A civilization avoids catastrophe not only by accumulating power, but by learning to make the distinctions that prevent power from becoming blind. The Thucydides Trap is dangerous because it compresses many distinctions into one overwhelming narrative: rising power, ruling power, fear, rivalry, war. Its danger lies not only in the possibility that it may describe a real structural pattern, but in the possibility that it may obscure the very discernments needed to transform that pattern.

The first task, therefore, is not policy. It is discernment. Before repair can occur, the world must learn to see more clearly what is being confused.

5.1 Warning Is Not Destiny

The Thucydides Trap must be received as a warning, not a verdict. A warning opens responsibility. A verdict closes possibility.

If leaders treat the trap as fate, they begin to inhabit the roles it assigns to them. China becomes “the rising power.” The United States becomes “the ruling power.” Taiwan becomes “the flashpoint.” The Indo-Pacific becomes “the theatre.” Technology becomes “the arms race.” Diplomacy becomes “the pause before conflict.” In this way, historical analogy can become performative. It can bring forth the very world it claims merely to describe.

The civilizational distinction is therefore decisive: history offers patterns, not commandments. The past can illuminate danger, but it cannot absolve the present of responsibility. To invoke Thucydides responsibly is to say: we recognize the pattern, and therefore we refuse to be governed by it.

This is why the official Chinese framing matters. Xi’s question was not presented as a declaration that war is inevitable, but as an inquiry into whether China and the United States could overcome the Thucydides Trap and establish a new paradigm of major-country relations (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). That question is not yet the repair, but it keeps the historical analogy open as warning rather than closed as destiny.

5.2 Strategic Stability Is Not Peace

Strategic stability is necessary. It reduces the risk that rivalry will become uncontrolled escalation. It provides channels, guardrails, consultation mechanisms, military-to-military communication, and crisis-management routines. In a nuclear, cybernetic, AI-accelerated, economically interdependent world, such stability is indispensable.

But strategic stability is not peace.

Strategic stability can coexist with militarized fear, structural violence, ecological destruction, technological domination, coercive sanctions, arms racing, and the sacrifice of smaller societies to great-power bargaining. It may prevent immediate war while leaving intact the deeper field that continually regenerates war-risk.

The language of "constructive strategic stability" is therefore important but incomplete. Channel NewsAsia reported that the formulation was presented as a new positioning for Sino-U.S. relations, centered on cooperation, measured competition, manageable differences, and lasting stability; analysts interpreted it less as an end to strategic competition than as an effort to define the boundaries within which competition would unfold (Channel NewsAsia, 2026).

This is useful. It may help place a floor beneath rivalry. Yet a floor is not a home. Guardrails may prevent immediate collision, but they do not by themselves repair the road that repeatedly produces collision-risk.

Life-coherent peace is more demanding. It asks whether the conditions that produce fear are being repaired. It asks whether the relationship reduces the need for coercion. It asks whether smaller peoples are protected from being absorbed into the calculations of larger powers. It asks whether resources are being redirected toward health, ecological restoration, climate stability, education, food security, and public trust. It asks whether peace is being defined only as the absence of open war, or as the presence of life-serving order.

In this sense, Galtung's distinction between negative peace and positive peace remains indispensable. Negative peace is the absence of direct violence; positive peace requires the transformation of structural conditions that prevent human flourishing (Galtung, 1969). Life-coherent peace deepens this insight by asking whether the whole field — military, economic, technological, ecological, symbolic, and institutional — preserves or degrades life-capacity.

5.3 Peer Recognition Is Not Permission for Domination

China's demand for recognition as a major power cannot simply be dismissed. A world order that permanently humiliates or subordinates rising powers produces resentment, revisionism, and danger. Any durable peace must include recognition, dignity, and room for legitimate development.

But peer recognition is not permission for domination.

To recognize China as a civilizational-scale power does not mean granting it moral ownership over the lives, institutions, choices, and futures of others. It does not mean accepting coercion toward Taiwan. It does not mean normalizing pressure on neighbors. It does not mean silencing the voices of smaller states because larger powers require "stability."

The same distinction applies to the United States. The defence of a rules-based order cannot mean permanent U.S. primacy. It cannot mean selective legality, exceptional intervention, economic coercion, or the presumption that Washington alone may define the terms of legitimacy. A rules-based order becomes credible only when the rules discipline the powerful as well as the weak.

The repair here requires a post-hegemonic grammar. Such a grammar does not ask which power will dominate the next order. It asks how power itself can be made answerable to the lives it affects.

This distinction is especially important because much of the summit's symbolic significance concerned recognition. Reporting from The Guardian noted that analysts interpreted the summit as reflecting a shift toward greater perceived parity between Washington and Beijing, even while major issues remained unresolved (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). From a life-coherent perspective, parity itself is not enough. The question is not merely whether great powers recognize each other, but whether they recognize the lives and rights of those who stand in the shadow of their rivalry.

5.4 Taiwan Is Not a Trigger; Taiwan Is a Living Society

No distinction is more urgent than this one.

In the strategic imagination, Taiwan is often reduced to an object: a flashpoint, an island-chain node, a semiconductor hub, a credibility test, a sovereignty claim, a democratic outpost, a red line, a bargaining chip, a tripwire. Each description captures something. Each also risks abstraction.

Taiwan is not a trigger. Taiwan is a living society.

It is composed of persons, families, workers, children, elders, schools, hospitals, farms, businesses, temples, universities, memories, languages, institutions, coastlines, watersheds, and futures. To reduce Taiwan to a trigger is to begin the moral erasure that makes catastrophe thinkable.

The current danger is clear. The Chinese official account identified Taiwan as the most important issue in China-U.S. relations and warned that mishandling it could lead to clashes or conflicts (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). Reuters reported that Trump said he had not decided whether to proceed with a major weapons sale to Taiwan, that he made no commitment to Xi regarding Taiwan, and that he declined to say whether the United States would defend Taiwan if China attacked (Hunnicutt & Chu, 2026). Subsequent Reuters reporting noted Taiwan's insistence that U.S. arms sales remain central to regional deterrence and security (Blanchard & Lee, 2026).

A life-coherent framework does not solve Taiwan by pretending the sovereignty conflict is simple. It reframes the ethical floor beneath the conflict. Whatever political arrangements are pursued, Taiwan's people must not be converted into sacrificial material for national

rejuvenation, imperial credibility, alliance signaling, or historical revenge. Their lives are not subordinate to the symbolic needs of great powers.

The minimum life-coherent principle is this: no settlement, deterrence strategy, blockade, declaration, arms posture, or diplomatic bargain is legitimate if it treats Taiwan's living society as expendable.

5.5 Interdependence Is Not Life-Coherent When It Becomes Hostage-Dependence

Modern globalization has often confused efficiency with resilience. Supply chains were built for speed, price, and scale, not for life-protection under crisis. Energy systems, food systems, shipping routes, rare earths, medicines, semiconductors, digital networks, and finance became globally intertwined, but not necessarily life-coherent.

Interdependence becomes dangerous when each side depends on the other in ways that can be weaponized. This is not mutual flourishing. It is hostage-dependence.

The Iran-Hormuz context reveals this vulnerability. The Guardian reported that the Beijing summit produced little tangible progress on Iran, Taiwan, or AI, and that the Strait of Hormuz remained central because of its importance to energy flows and the wider global economy (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). This is not a peripheral issue. It shows that U.S.–China rivalry cannot be separated from energy chokepoints, regional wars, inflation, shipping, sanctions, and public hardship.

A life-coherent order would not seek autarkic isolation. It would seek resilient interdependence: diversified supply chains, regional buffers, shared emergency reserves, public health security, food-system redundancy, energy transition, and demilitarized protection of essential civilian flows. The aim is not to sever connection. The aim is to ensure that connection does not become coercion.

This is where Ostrom's work on commons governance becomes relevant. Durable commons require rules, monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict-resolution mechanisms, and nested institutions rather than either centralized domination or unregulated extraction (Ostrom, 1990). A life-coherent global order would extend this insight to the civil commons: the shared systems of food, health, energy, water, ecological stability, and public knowledge that must remain protected from geopolitical weaponization.

5.6 Deterrence May Prevent War, but It Cannot Heal Fear

Deterrence is a tragic necessity in a world where coercive power exists. It may prevent aggression by making the costs of aggression intolerable. It may buy time. It may protect vulnerable societies.

But deterrence cannot heal fear.

Indeed, deterrence often works by institutionalizing fear. It communicates: do not act, because the consequences will be unbearable. This may be necessary at the edge of danger, but it cannot become the whole architecture of peace. A world that depends entirely on fear of punishment remains spiritually, politically, and materially unstable.

The repair is not unilateral disarmament or naïve trust. The repair is the subordination of deterrence to relational security. Relational security includes crisis communication, de-escalation pathways, no-surprise protocols, military-to-military contact, nuclear risk reduction, cyber restraint, AI-command safeguards, maritime encounter rules, and face-saving exit ramps. It recognizes that leaders often need not only a reason to step back, but a way to step back without humiliation.

This is one of the most neglected requirements of peace: political systems must be given dignified pathways away from escalation. Otherwise, pride becomes a prison.

5.7 Technology Supremacy Is Not Civilizational Progress

The U.S.–China rivalry is not only military and territorial. It is technological. Semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum systems, cyber capabilities, satellites, drones, biotechnology, rare earth supply chains, surveillance infrastructures, and autonomous weapons all belong to the new terrain of strategic competition.

But technological supremacy is not the same as civilizational progress.

Technology becomes life-coherent only when it expands the conditions of life-capacity. It becomes life-blind when it increases domination, surveillance, ecological throughput, psychological manipulation, autonomous violence, or systemic fragility. A society can become technologically advanced and civilizationally immature at the same time.

The relevant question is therefore not simply which country leads in AI, chips, or military systems. The deeper question is whether technological development is governed by life-protective constraints. Does it protect health, learning, ecological repair, public knowledge, disaster response, democratic accountability, and human dignity? Or does it accelerate fear, inequality, dependency, coercion, and war-readiness?

The Guardian described AI as one of the major unresolved issues at the summit, alongside Iran and Taiwan (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). That unresolved status is itself telling. The technologies most capable of compressing decision time, amplifying surveillance, destabilizing information environments, and accelerating military competition remain insufficiently governed by life-protective norms.

A life-coherent technological order would require shared red lines around autonomous escalation, AI-enabled nuclear command, cyberattacks on civilian infrastructure, biosecurity risks, deepfake destabilization, and surveillance-enabled repression. Without such constraints, the technological race becomes another form of the Thucydides Trap: each side seeks superiority to become safe, and in doing so makes the whole system less safe.

5.8 National Interest Is Not Ultimate

The language of national interest dominates statecraft. It is not meaningless. Governments have obligations to their peoples. They must protect safety, prosperity, territorial integrity, social order, and the future of their societies.

But national interest is not ultimate.

The life-ground is prior. Air, water, climate, oceans, biodiversity, food systems, health systems, care systems, children, and future generations precede the state system. States are instruments for protecting life, not final ends in themselves. When national greatness is pursued at the expense of planetary viability, it becomes life-blind.

This is the deepest correction required. The central question of world politics can no longer be only, “What serves national advantage?” It must become, “What preserves and regenerates the conditions of life for all affected?”

This does not abolish national interest. It reorders it. A nation that destroys the life-ground ultimately destroys the basis of its own security.

McMurtry’s life-value ontology is useful here because it distinguishes life-capital from money-capital and evaluates social systems by whether they enable or disable life-capacities (McMurtry, 2013). Maturana and Varela’s work on autopoiesis likewise reminds us that cognition and action bring forth a world rather than merely represent one (Maturana & Varela, 1987). The geopolitical implication is profound: security practices do not merely respond to reality; they participate in producing the world in which future action becomes possible or impossible.

These distinctions are not abstract exercises. They are repair instructions. Once warning is distinguished from destiny, stability from peace, recognition from domination, deterrence from relational security, and national interest from planetary life-interest, the next question becomes practical: what architecture can hold rivalry within life-protective limits while repairing the conditions that generate rivalry in the first place?

6. What Must Be Repaired. Toward Life-Coherent Strategic Stability

The task is not to abandon strategic stability, but to deepen it. In a world of nuclear weapons, cyber vulnerabilities, AI-enabled systems, maritime flashpoints, energy chokepoints, economic coercion, and rival national narratives, strategic stability remains indispensable. The question is whether it can become more than the management of danger.

The official Chinese framing of the May 2026 summit proposed a "constructive China-U.S. relationship of strategic stability" as a new vision for guiding bilateral relations, while Channel NewsAsia reported that analysts interpreted this language as an attempt to define the boundaries of competition rather than end competition itself (Channel NewsAsia, 2026; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a).

But a life-coherent framework asks a deeper question: stability for whom, at whose cost, and in service of what?

A rivalry can be stable in a narrow strategic sense while remaining life-destructive. It can avoid open war while sustaining arms races, coercive interdependence, ecological damage, public fear, technological militarization, and the subordination of smaller societies to great-power bargaining. Stability, therefore, is not enough. Stability must become answerable to life.

The proposed repair is **life-coherent strategic stability**.

Life-coherent strategic stability is the disciplined effort to prevent great-power rivalry from damaging the conditions of life. It does not deny conflict, power, deterrence, or national interest. It reorders them. It asks whether rivalry can be constrained, redirected, and transformed so that peoples, ecosystems, institutions, civil commons, and future generations are not sacrificed to the anxieties of power.

It has five pillars: crisis non-escalation, Taiwan life-protection, civil commons resilience, technology under life-protective constraint, and planetary repair diplomacy.

6.1 Pillar One: Crisis Non-Escalation

The first repair is the creation of reliable pathways by which crises do not become wars.

In the present U.S.–China field, escalation could arise from multiple sources: a Taiwan Strait incident, naval collision, aircraft encounter, cyberattack attribution error, AI-enabled misclassification, sanctions retaliation, blockade signaling, domestic political pressure, or third-region shock. The danger is not only intentional aggression. It is cascade.

Crisis non-escalation therefore requires practical mechanisms: tested military-to-military hotlines; maritime and air encounter protocols; cyber emergency communication channels; AI command-and-control safeguards; nuclear risk-reduction dialogue; advance notification of major exercises; public rhetoric restraint during flashpoints; and mutually recognized off-ramps from confrontation.

These mechanisms are not signs of weakness. They are the infrastructure of survival. A world that can escalate faster than it can interpret events is a world without sufficient margin.

The deeper repair is psychological and symbolic. States must learn how to de-escalate without humiliation. In fear-based systems, backing down is often interpreted domestically as defeat. In life-coherent systems, backing down from catastrophe is recognized as political maturity.

A civilization that cannot honor restraint will eventually reward recklessness.

6.2 Pillar Two: Taiwan Life-Protection

Taiwan requires its own life-protection framework because it is the most acute convergence point of sovereignty, identity, deterrence, democracy, nationalism, alliance credibility, semiconductor dependence, and military risk.

The Chinese official account identified Taiwan as the most important issue in China-U.S. relations and warned that mishandling it could lead to clashes or conflict (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). Reuters reported that Trump said he discussed Taiwan arms sales with Xi, made no commitment, and would decide soon on future sales; subsequent Reuters reporting noted Taiwan's insistence that U.S. arms sales remain central to regional deterrence and security (Blanchard & Lee, 2026; Hunnicutt & Chu, 2026).

This confirms the fragility of the field. But the deeper civilizational error would be to treat Taiwan only as a flashpoint between larger powers. Taiwan must be restored as a living society.

A Taiwan life-protection framework would not claim to resolve the final-status question. It would establish a prior ethical floor: Taiwan's people must not be subjected to invasion, blockade, starvation, cyber-paralysis, infrastructural collapse, or coerced political erasure because competing powers require symbolic victory.

The framework would ask every actor to pass the same test:

Does this action increase or decrease the probability that Taiwan's people can continue living without war, coercion, imposed erasure, or catastrophic disruption?

For Beijing, this requires restraint from military coercion, blockade rehearsal, forced inevitability narratives, and symbolic escalation that treats force as historical destiny.

For Washington, it requires that Taiwan not be used as an instrument of containment, domestic political performance, or alliance credibility theatre.

For Taipei, it requires democratic self-governance combined with prudence, resilience, and avoidance of preventable escalation.

For regional partners, it requires preparedness, humanitarian planning, economic continuity, and support for de-escalatory diplomacy.

The moral logic is simple: the living society must remain more real than the strategic abstraction.

6.3 Pillar Three: Civil Commons Resilience

Great-power rivalry becomes especially dangerous when the systems that sustain ordinary life are brittle. Food, water, energy, medicines, health care, communications, transport, finance, education, disaster response, ecological buffers, public knowledge, and social trust are not background conditions. They are the civil commons of survival.

The Iran-Hormuz crisis illustrates how regional conflict can become global systemic stress. Reuters reported that Trump said Xi agreed Iran must reopen the Strait of Hormuz, while China did not publicly confirm that position and instead criticized the war itself as one that should not have happened. Reuters also described the strait as a conduit for about one-fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas flows (Hunnicutt & Choukeir, 2026). The Guardian similarly reported that the Beijing summit produced limited breakthroughs on Iran, Taiwan, or AI, despite its emphasis on stability and high-level engagement (Hawkins & Smith, 2026).

The lesson is not merely that energy routes matter. The lesson is that material fragility becomes geopolitical danger. A shock to oil routes becomes inflation. Inflation becomes social anger. Social anger becomes nationalist pressure. Nationalist pressure narrows diplomatic space. Diplomatic rigidity increases military danger. This is how brittle civil systems become escalatory systems.

Civil commons resilience therefore becomes a security imperative.

This includes distributed renewable energy, strategic food reserves, essential medicine production, public health preparedness, cyber-resilient hospitals and utilities, climate adaptation, water security, protected ports, disaster response systems, truthful public knowledge, and redundancy in essential supply chains.

The repair is to stop treating the civil commons as secondary to national security. The civil commons are national security. More deeply, they are planetary security. A population with functioning health care, food access, energy resilience, trustworthy information, and social solidarity is less vulnerable to panic, manipulation, militarization, and authoritarian mobilization.

In life-coherent terms, resilience is margin. Without margin, every disturbance becomes existential.

6.4 Pillar Four: Technology Under Life-Protective Constraint

Technology must be brought under explicit life-protective governance.

The U.S.–China competition in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, cyber systems, drones, space infrastructure, quantum tools, biotechnology, surveillance, rare earths, and autonomous weapons cannot be governed solely by market incentives or military advantage. If each side treats technological supremacy as the path to safety, both may accelerate toward systemic danger.

The Guardian reported that AI was one of the major unresolved issues at the May 2026 summit, alongside Iran and Taiwan (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). That unresolved status matters because AI-enabled systems can compress decision time, destabilize information environments, accelerate targeting, intensify surveillance, and reduce the human margin required for judgment.

Life-protective technological constraint would include prohibitions or strict limits on autonomous nuclear decision systems; binding norms against cyberattacks on hospitals, water systems, energy grids, and food logistics; AI safety channels between major powers; shared incident reporting for AI-related military risks; limits on deepfake destabilization during crises; biosecurity cooperation; and international norms governing autonomous weapons.

The ethical test is not whether a technology is impressive. The ethical test is whether it protects or degrades life-capacity.

Technology that increases the speed of escalation beyond human deliberation is not progress. Technology that expands surveillance without accountability is not progress. Technology that improves targeting while disabling moral reflection is not progress. Technology that deepens ecological extraction while claiming efficiency is not progress.

Life-coherent technology must remain answerable to bodies, communities, ecosystems, and future generations.

6.5 Pillar Five: Planetary Repair Diplomacy

The final pillar is the deepest because it reorders the purpose of diplomacy itself.

The United States and China should not be judged only by whether they avoid war with each other. They should be judged by whether their relationship enables or disables planetary repair.

This includes climate stabilization, ocean protection, biodiversity restoration, pandemic preparedness, debt relief, disaster response, food security, clean energy transition,

nuclear risk reduction, and public health cooperation. These are not optional humanitarian additions to "real" geopolitics. They are the deeper reality that geopolitics must serve.

A rivalry that prevents planetary repair is already a form of civilizational failure, even if it never becomes open war.

Planetary repair diplomacy asks both powers to identify domains where competition must be suspended, limited, or subordinated to common survival. The climate system does not care which state is dominant. Viruses do not respect spheres of influence. Ocean acidification does not pause for strategic ambiguity. Nuclear winter would not distinguish victor from loser. AI-enabled systemic instability would not confine itself to one bloc.

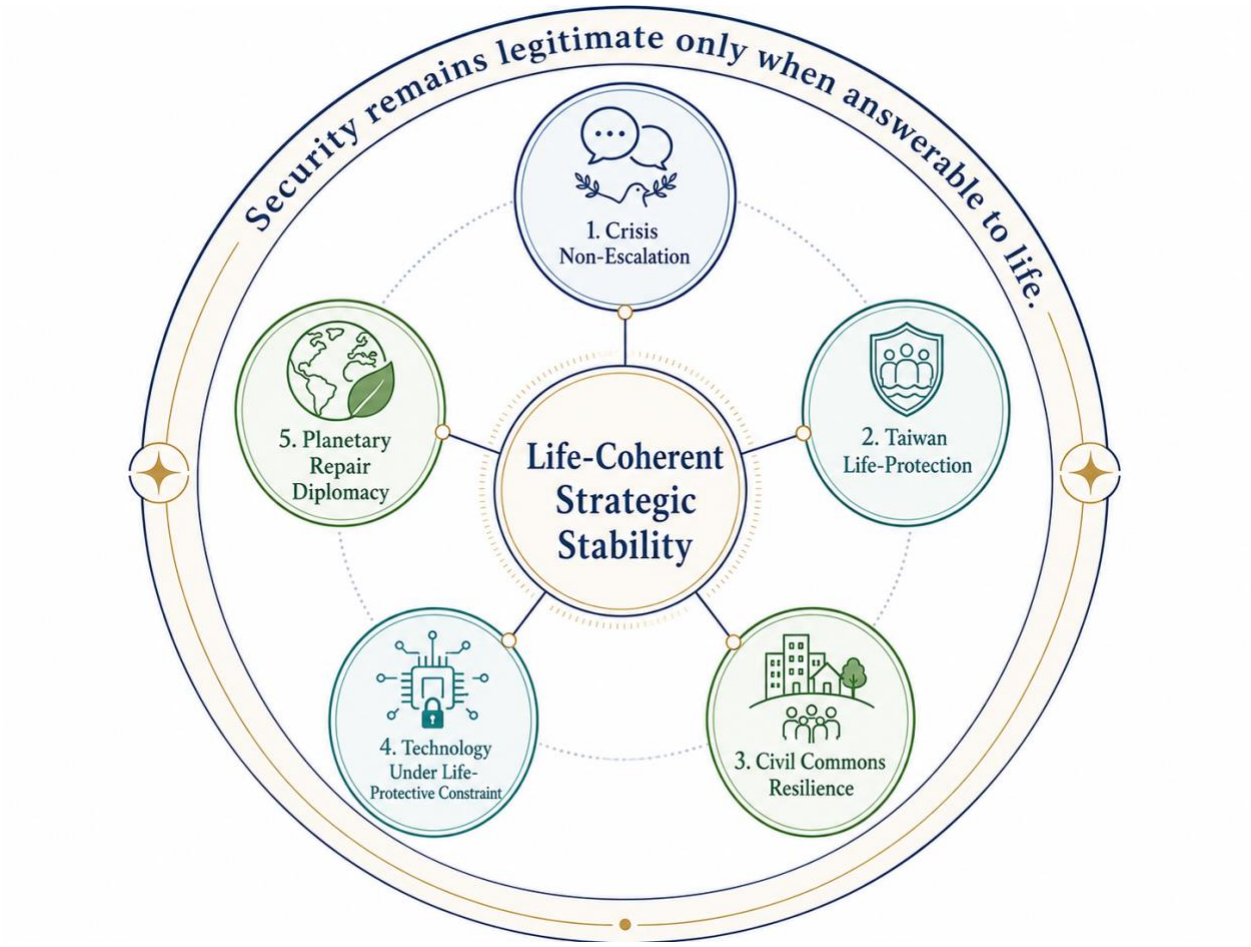
The life-ground imposes a discipline that power politics has not yet fully understood.

A life-coherent architecture therefore insists that U.S.–China competition must be bounded by common obligations to the Earth systems and civil commons on which all peoples depend.

Table 2. From Strategic Stability to Life-Coherent Strategic Stability

Conventional strategic stability	**Life-coherent strategic stability**
Prevents uncontrolled escalation	Prevents escalation while repairing its causes
Centers great-power survival	Centers the protection of peoples, ecosystems, civil commons, and future generations
Treats Taiwan primarily as a flashpoint	Restores Taiwan as a living society
Manages competition	Disciplines competition under life-protective constraints
Preserves deterrence	Subordinates deterrence to relational security and de-escalation
Protects national interests	Reorders national interests within planetary life-interest
Focuses on military and diplomatic guardrails	Includes civil commons resilience, technology governance, and ecological repair
Aims for stable rivalry	Aims for viable coexistence and shared life-ground protection

Figure 1. The Five Pillars of Life-Coherent Strategic Stability.



Caption. A radial conceptual diagram showing life-coherent strategic stability as the central organizing principle of a life-protective security framework. Five interdependent pillars surround the center: Crisis Non-Escalation, Taiwan Life-Protection, Civil Commons Resilience, Technology Under Life-Protective Constraint, and Planetary Repair Diplomacy. The outer ring states the governing normative principle: "Security remains legitimate only when answerable to life."

Life-coherent strategic stability does not reject realism. It deepens realism. It asks whether the "real" has been defined too narrowly by power, threat, and national survival, while ignoring the life-ground that makes survival possible. The next section therefore turns from strategic realism to life-coherent realism.

7. From Strategic Realism to Life-Coherent Realism

Life-coherent strategic stability does not reject realism. It deepens realism.

Strategic realism begins from the world as it is: states seek survival, power matters, interests conflict, threats must be deterred, and institutions cannot abolish insecurity. These premises cannot be dismissed. A life-coherent framework that ignored coercion, military capability, territorial conflict, authoritarian pressure, alliance structures, nuclear weapons, cyber vulnerability, or domestic political incentives would be morally serious but strategically naïve.

Yet conventional realism often defines the "real" too narrowly. It treats power, threat, and state survival as the primary realities, while relegating the life-ground to the background. It sees borders, alliances, force posture, deterrence, and strategic advantage clearly, but often sees air, water, soil, climate, food systems, public health, care, ecological stability, social trust, and future generations only as secondary variables. This is not realism deep enough for the twenty-first century.

The present U.S.–China rivalry exposes the limits of shallow realism. The May 2026 summit was framed around strategic stability, Taiwan, Iran, trade, artificial intelligence, and global turbulence. The Chinese official readout presented "constructive strategic stability" as a new vision for relations, while press reporting emphasized that core issues such as Iran, Taiwan, and AI remained unresolved (Channel NewsAsia, 2026; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a; Hawkins & Smith, 2026). The relevant reality is therefore not only the balance of power between Washington and Beijing. It is the whole relational field through which military danger, energy vulnerability, technological acceleration, public narratives, ecological stress, and civil commons fragility interact.

Life-coherent realism begins from this wider field.

It accepts that states seek security, but asks whether their security practices preserve or degrade the conditions of life.

It accepts that power matters, but asks whether power remains answerable to those affected by it.

It accepts that deterrence may be necessary, but asks whether deterrence is subordinated to de-escalation and repair.

It accepts that national interest exists, but asks whether national interest has been reordered within planetary life-interest.

It accepts that rivalry may persist, but asks whether rivalry is being disciplined by life-protective limits.

This is not idealism. It is realism at the level of viability.

A state cannot be secure if its food systems fail, its public health systems collapse, its ecological foundations degrade, its information systems become untrustworthy, its population loses social cohesion, or its economy depends on brittle supply chains vulnerable to blockade, sanctions, or shock. A great power cannot ultimately secure itself by making the wider world less viable. A world of frightened, hungry, indebted, overheated, militarized, and ecologically destabilized societies is not a stable world for any state, however powerful.

This insight reframes the meaning of power. Power is not only the ability to compel, deter, produce, surveil, or dominate. Power is also the ability to preserve margin, sustain trust, repair damaged systems, protect the civil commons, reduce unnecessary fear, and prevent disturbance from becoming catastrophe. In life-coherent realism, the highest form of power is not the capacity to win a breakdown. It is the capacity to prevent breakdown while preserving the conditions for flourishing.

This also reframes the meaning of peace. Peace is not merely the absence of direct violence. Galtung's distinction between negative peace and positive peace remains central: negative peace refers to the absence of direct violence, while positive peace requires the transformation of structural conditions that generate violence and prevent flourishing (Galtung, 1969). Life-coherent realism extends this distinction by asking whether the whole relational field — military, economic, technological, ecological, symbolic, and institutional — preserves or disables life-capacity.

From this perspective, a stable arms race is not peace. A managed rivalry that drains the civil commons is not peace. A trade relationship built on coercive dependence is not peace. A technological competition that accelerates autonomous violence, surveillance, ecological extraction, and information collapse is not peace. A Taiwan policy that treats a living society as a trigger or bargaining object is not peace.

Peace is the presence of life-serving order.

The same reframing applies to sovereignty. Sovereignty remains important because peoples need political agency, collective self-determination, institutional protection, cultural continuity, and freedom from coercive domination. But sovereignty is not absolute possession. It is responsibility-bearing agency. A state's sovereignty is legitimate insofar as it protects the life-capacities of its people without destroying the life-capacities of others.

This distinction matters especially in the Taiwan context. Beijing's sovereignty claim, Washington's deterrence posture, Taipei's democratic self-governance, and regional security concerns all operate within a field of high symbolic and military risk. Reuters reporting after the summit showed that Taiwan continued to press the case for U.S. arms while Trump remained undecided on future sales, underscoring the unresolved status of the flashpoint (Blanchard & Lee, 2026). A life-coherent realism does not pretend this

conflict is simple. It insists, however, that no claim of sovereignty, deterrence, credibility, or national destiny is legitimate if it treats Taiwan's living society as expendable.

Life-coherent realism also reframes interdependence. Conventional strategy often asks whether interdependence gives one side leverage over another. Life-coherent realism asks whether interdependence increases shared resilience or mutual vulnerability. The distinction is crucial. When energy routes, food systems, medical supply chains, shipping corridors, semiconductors, rare earths, and digital networks become instruments of coercion, interdependence becomes hostage-dependence. When they are governed as protected civil commons, interdependence becomes a source of shared viability.

This requires a different approach to economics. Economic power cannot be judged only by growth, market access, export share, industrial dominance, or technological control. It must be judged by whether it secures the material conditions of life: food, water, health, energy, shelter, education, ecological stability, and meaningful participation. McMurtry's life-value ontology is helpful here because it evaluates social systems by whether they enable or disable life-capacities rather than merely expand money-value (McMurtry, 2013). In geopolitical terms, this means that economic statecraft must be judged by its effects on living systems, not only by its contribution to national advantage.

Life-coherent realism also reframes technology. The question is not whether the United States or China leads in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, drones, cyber systems, quantum tools, biotechnology, or surveillance infrastructures. The deeper question is whether these technologies are governed by life-protective constraints. The Guardian's account of the summit noted that AI remained one of the unresolved issues between the two powers, alongside Iran and Taiwan (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). That unresolved status is dangerous because technologies that compress decision time, destabilize information environments, or automate violence can reduce the human margin required for wisdom.

In this sense, technological superiority without life-coherent governance is not progress. It is accelerated fragility.

Life-coherent realism finally reframes the role of imagination. Conventional realism often presents itself as sober and unsentimental, but it can become unimaginative when it assumes that rivalry, fear, and domination are permanent features of political life. A life-coherent realism is not sentimental. It is disciplined imagination under constraint. It asks what forms of order can preserve life when distrust persists, when political systems differ, when historical wounds remain, and when interests conflict.

The goal is not harmony without conflict. The goal is viable conflict: conflict bounded by life-protective restraints, de-escalatory pathways, civil commons protection, ecological responsibility, and respect for the living realities affected by power.

This is where Maturana and Varela's insight into cognition as world-bringing becomes politically significant. Human systems do not merely perceive a pre-given world; through their distinctions, practices, and institutions, they bring forth a world in which certain

actions become natural and others unthinkable (Maturana & Varela, 1987). If states bring forth a world in which the other is primarily threat, then military preparation, technological supremacy, coercive leverage, and symbolic escalation become common sense. If they bring forth a world in which security is answerable to life, then restraint, repair, resilience, and shared survival become realistic.

The Thucydides Trap is therefore a test of realism itself. It asks whether realism will remain trapped in the management of fear, or whether it can deepen into the discipline of viability.

Strategic realism asks: how can the state survive among threats?

Life-coherent realism asks: what kind of world must be brought forth so that states, peoples, ecosystems, and future generations can remain viable under conditions of difference?

The second question does not replace the first. It completes it.

8. A Life-Coherent Architecture for Great-Power Repair

A framework remains incomplete unless it can guide repair. The purpose of this white paper is not only to reinterpret the Thucydides Trap, but to show how a fear-based geopolitical field might be reorganized toward life-coherent security.

The official Chinese framing of the May 2026 summit presented "constructive strategic stability" as the new positioning of China-U.S. relations, while Channel NewsAsia reported that analysts interpreted the phrase as Beijing's attempt to define long-term competition within managed limits rather than to end strategic rivalry altogether (Channel NewsAsia, 2026; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). This is a necessary beginning. But from a life-coherent perspective, the question is not only whether rivalry can be managed. The deeper question is whether rivalry can be prevented from damaging the conditions of life.

The architecture proposed here operates at three levels.

At the **crisis level**, the task is to prevent miscalculation, humiliation, panic, or domestic political pressure from turning a local incident into a major war.

At the **systemic rivalry level**, the task is to transform the relationship from mutual threat production into disciplined coexistence, bounded competition, and selective cooperation.

At the **planetary life-ground level**, the task is to ensure that U.S.–China rivalry does not disable climate repair, food security, public health, ecological restoration, nuclear risk reduction, civil commons resilience, or the protection of future generations.

That is why the architecture of repair must be integrated. Taiwan policy, AI governance, energy resilience, crisis communication, civil commons protection, and planetary repair cannot be treated as disconnected policy silos.

8.1 The Design Principle: Security Must Remain Answerable to Life

The first design principle is simple:

Security is legitimate only when it remains answerable to life.

This principle does not abolish national security. It disciplines it. It asks whether a security policy protects or endangers the living conditions it claims to defend. It asks whether deterrence preserves peace or reproduces permanent fear. It asks whether technology increases shared viability or accelerates escalation. It asks whether economic statecraft builds resilience or weaponizes dependency. It asks whether Taiwan is protected as a living society or reduced to a trigger in a great-power script.

This principle also clarifies why strategic stability alone is insufficient. A rivalry may be strategically stable while remaining life-destructive. It may avoid direct war while

sustaining arms races, coercive interdependence, surveillance expansion, ecological damage, brittle supply chains, and structural violence. The task, therefore, is not simply to keep the major powers from fighting. The task is to ensure that their non-war does not continue to drain the life-ground.

8.2 The Architecture of Repair

A life-coherent architecture for great-power repair has five interlocking functions.

First, it must **slow escalation**. Modern crisis systems can move faster than human interpretation. Cyberattacks, AI-generated signals, maritime incidents, missile alerts, financial shocks, and viral disinformation can all compress decision time. The repair is to increase margin: hotlines, verification channels, advance notification, human judgment safeguards, rhetoric restraint, and face-saving off-ramps.

Second, it must **restore living societies beneath strategic abstractions**. Taiwan is the clearest case. The Chinese official readout identified Taiwan as the most important issue in China-U.S. relations, while Reuters reported that Taiwan pressed for continued U.S. arms supplies after Trump said he remained undecided on future sales (Blanchard & Lee, 2026; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). A life-coherent architecture does not resolve the final-status question by assertion. It establishes an ethical floor: Taiwan's people must not be subjected to invasion, blockade, starvation, cyber-paralysis, coerced erasure, or great-power bargaining that treats their lives as secondary.

Third, it must **protect the civil commons**. Food, water, energy, medicines, hospitals, public health systems, disaster response, communications, ecological buffers, and truthful public knowledge are not "soft" domains. They are the living substrate of security. Reuters reported that the Strait of Hormuz had carried about one-fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas supply before the Iran crisis disrupted shipping, showing how energy chokepoints can convert regional conflict into global systemic stress (Hunnicutt & Choukeir, 2026).

Fourth, it must **govern technology under life-protective constraint**. AI, semiconductors, cyber systems, autonomous weapons, drones, satellites, biotechnology, surveillance infrastructures, and data systems must be judged by whether they preserve or degrade life-capacity. The Guardian reported that the summit produced little tangible progress on Iran, Taiwan, or the AI arms race, underscoring how major danger domains remain insufficiently governed (Hawkins & Smith, 2026).

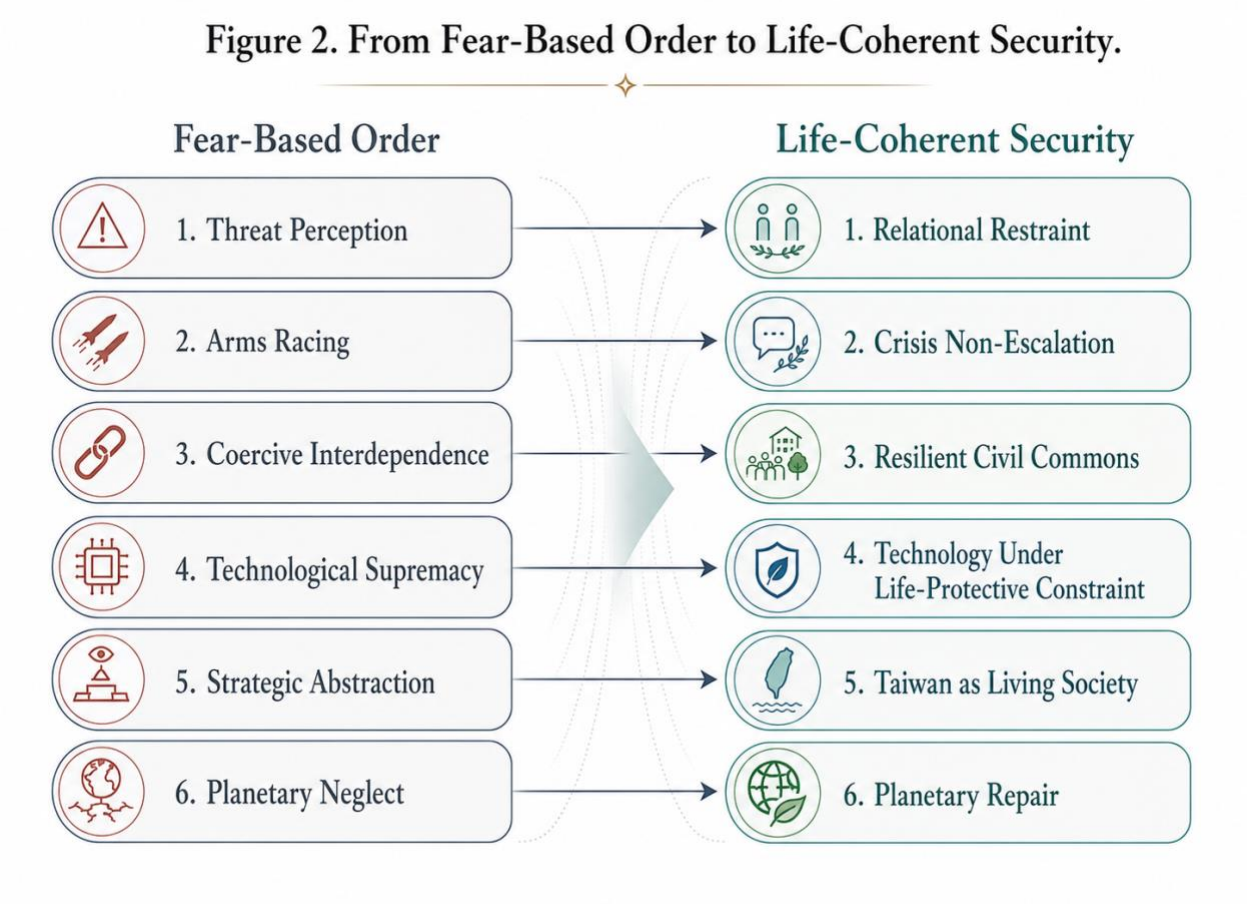
Fifth, it must **subordinate rivalry to planetary repair**. The United States and China should be judged not only by whether they avoid war, but by whether their relationship enables climate stabilization, pandemic preparedness, ocean protection, biodiversity restoration, food security, nuclear risk reduction, and disaster resilience. A rivalry that disables planetary repair is already a form of civilizational failure, even if it never becomes open war.

Table 3. Life-Coherent Architecture for Great-Power Repair

Repair domain	**Core danger**	**Life-coherent design question**	**Operational repair**
Crisis escalation	Local incidents cascade into major conflict	How can margin be preserved before panic hardens?	Hotlines, military deconfliction, cyber clarification channels, AI safeguards, rhetoric restraint, off-ramps
Taiwan	Living society reduced to strategic trigger	Does this action protect Taiwan's people from war, coercion, erasure, or catastrophic disruption?	Civilian continuity planning, restraint in coercive signaling, humanitarian preparedness, de-escalatory diplomacy
Energy and supply chains	Interdependence becomes hostage-dependence	Are essential flows resilient, diversified, and protected from coercion?	Redundant supply chains, energy transition, emergency reserves, protected civilian logistics
Technology	Supremacy race accelerates systemic fragility	Does the technology preserve or degrade life-capacity?	AI safety channels, cyber norms, autonomous weapons limits, civilian infrastructure protections
Civil commons	Ordinary life-support systems become brittle	Can societies continue functioning under disturbance?	Food, water, health, medicines, ports, utilities, disaster response, public knowledge resilience

Repair domain	Core danger	Life-coherent design question	Operational repair
Planetary repair	Rivalry blocks common survival tasks	Does the relationship enable or disable Earth-system repair?	Climate cooperation, ocean protection, pandemic preparedness, ecological restoration, nuclear risk reduction

This matrix changes the meaning of policy evaluation. A conventional framework asks whether a policy strengthens one side's position. A life-coherent framework asks whether a policy improves the viability of the whole field. A policy that strengthens one actor while making the wider system more brittle is not strategic wisdom. It is deferred danger.



Caption. A two-column transition diagram contrasting a fear-based security paradigm with a life-coherent alternative. The left column identifies the characteristic features of fear-based order—threat perception, arms racing, coercive interdependence,

technological supremacy, strategic abstraction, and planetary neglect—while the right column presents their life-coherent counterparts: relational restraint, crisis non-escalation, resilient civil commons, technology under life-protective constraint, Taiwan as living society, and planetary repair. The figure illustrates the transition from a security logic organized around fear, domination, and fragility to one oriented toward restraint, resilience, life-protection, and shared planetary viability.

8.3 From Guardrails to Regenerative Regulation

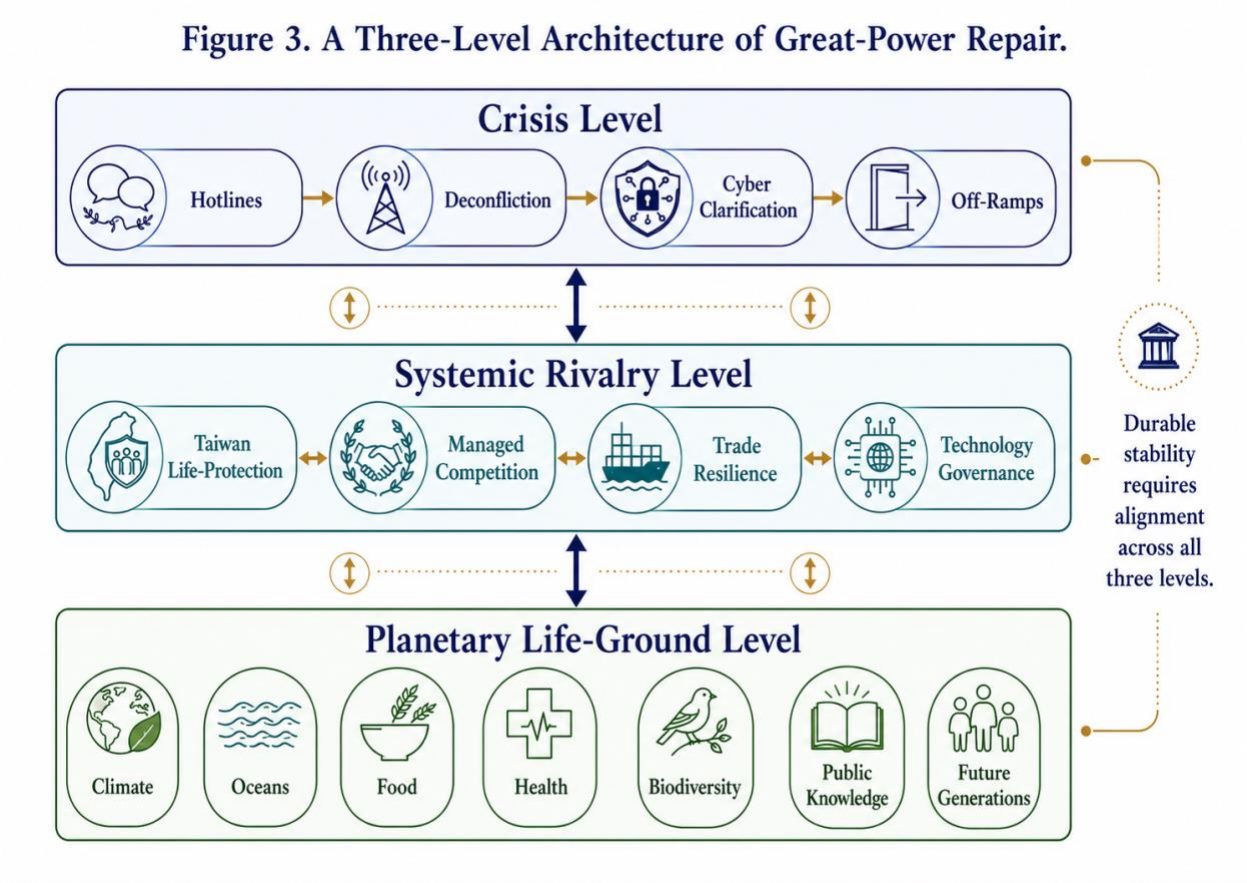
The language of "guardrails" is useful but limited. Guardrails prevent vehicles from leaving the road. They do not repair the road, redesign the route, or ask why traffic is repeatedly moving toward the cliff.

Life-coherent repair requires **regenerative regulation**. This means regulation that does more than prevent immediate breakdown. It restores the conditions that make breakdown less likely.

In U.S.–China relations, regenerative regulation would include crisis channels, but also public-health cooperation. It would include arms-control dialogue, but also AI safety norms. It would include Taiwan Strait deconfliction, but also protection of Taiwan's civilian life systems. It would include trade negotiation, but also resilience of food, medicine, energy, and ecological systems. It would include diplomatic summits, but also regional forums where smaller societies can articulate their own life-protection priorities.

The Guardian's reporting on the summit described pageantry and promises of stability, but limited concrete progress on the most dangerous issues, including Iran, Taiwan, and AI (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). This gap between symbolic stabilization and substantive repair is exactly what regenerative regulation is meant to address. A system is not repaired because leaders speak of stability. It is repaired when the conditions that generate instability are measurably changed.

Figure 3. A Three-Level Architecture of Great-Power Repair.



Caption. A layered systems diagram showing three interdependent levels of a life-coherent framework for managing great-power rivalry. The Crisis Level includes hotlines, deconfliction, cyber clarification, and off-ramps; the Systemic Rivalry Level includes Taiwan life-protection, managed competition, trade resilience, and technology governance; and the Planetary Life-Ground Level includes climate, oceans, food, health, biodiversity, public knowledge, and future generations. Arrows between the levels indicate that durable stability depends on alignment across immediate crisis management, long-horizon rivalry regulation, and the protection of the wider life-ground on which all security ultimately depends.

8.4 The Practical Test

The practical test of this architecture is not whether it sounds morally attractive. The test is whether it changes what decision-makers notice.

Before approving an arms package, leaders should ask not only how it affects deterrence, but whether it increases or decreases the probability that Taiwan's people can continue living without catastrophic disruption.

Before imposing export controls, governments should ask not only whether they slow a rival's capabilities, but whether they increase systemic fragility, retaliatory escalation, or incentives for technological militarization.

Before escalating sanctions, states should ask not only whether pressure is effective, but whether essential civilian systems are being pushed toward breakdown.

Before deploying AI-enabled military systems, commanders should ask not only whether they improve speed and targeting, but whether they reduce the human margin needed for restraint.

Before claiming strategic victory, great powers should ask whether the civil commons, smaller societies, and planetary life-ground are more secure than before.

This is the difference between policy as advantage-seeking and policy as life-responsible action.

A life-coherent architecture does not demand the end of difference, rivalry, or conflict. It demands that difference, rivalry, and conflict remain bounded by the protection of life. It asks power to submit to a higher discipline: the preservation of the conditions that make any future politics possible.

9. Institutional Pathways for Life-Coherent Repair

A framework remains incomplete unless it can be institutionalized. Life-coherent repair cannot remain a moral aspiration, nor can it depend on occasional summit diplomacy. It must be carried by standing institutions, recurring practices, measurable indicators, and distributed forms of responsibility.

The May 2026 Beijing summit demonstrated both the necessity and the limits of leader-level diplomacy. Official Chinese statements framed the meeting as an attempt to build a "constructive China-U.S. relationship of strategic stability," while independent reporting emphasized that major danger zones — especially Taiwan, Iran/Hormuz, and AI — remained unresolved or only partially addressed (Channel NewsAsia, 2026; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a; Hawkins & Smith, 2026). The lesson is clear: summitry can open a door, but institutions must hold it open.

The institutional challenge is therefore to build pathways that can operate before, during, and after crisis. These pathways must connect state diplomacy, military risk reduction, technology governance, regional agency, civil commons protection, planetary repair, and public narrative transformation.

9.1 Track-One Diplomatic Repair

The first pathway is formal state-to-state diplomacy. This remains indispensable. However, it must become less episodic and more structurally embedded.

At minimum, the United States and China need standing mechanisms that continue even when relations deteriorate: annual leader-level summits, foreign-minister emergency channels, defence hotlines, Taiwan Strait risk consultations, cyber deconfliction mechanisms, strategic stability dialogues, and working groups on AI safety, energy security, public health, and climate resilience.

The purpose is not to create trust before communication. The purpose is to preserve communication when trust is absent.

This matters because the most dangerous moments are precisely those in which leaders distrust one another, publics are inflamed, militaries are on alert, and uncertainty is high. If channels only function in calm periods, they are decorative. Life-coherent diplomacy requires channels that remain available under stress.

The immediate practical test is whether crisis communication is routinized, rehearsed, and politically protected. A hotline that exists but is not answered is not a regulator. A communiqué that speaks of stability but does not establish tested protocols is not enough. A strategic dialogue that collapses whenever relations worsen has not yet become an institution of repair.

9.2 Military-to-Military Risk Reduction

The second pathway is military-to-military risk reduction. In a high-arousal rivalry, militaries often become the first institutions to encounter one another physically: in the air, at sea, in cyber domains, in space, and through surveillance systems.

Military risk reduction must therefore include more than deterrent posture. It requires operational rules that preserve margin: air and maritime encounter protocols, notification of major exercises, incident investigation procedures, communication channels between theatre commanders, cyber clarification mechanisms, and explicit limits on actions near critical civilian infrastructure.

This is especially important around Taiwan and the South China Sea, where proximity, symbolism, and speed can turn incidents into crisis. Reuters reported that Taiwan reiterated the importance of U.S. arms sales for deterrence after Trump said he remained undecided on future sales following his meeting with Xi; this underscores how military posture, diplomatic signaling, and regional security perceptions remain tightly coupled (Blanchard & Lee, 2026).

A life-coherent approach does not deny deterrence. It insists that deterrence must be embedded within de-escalation architecture. The goal is not merely to make aggression costly. The goal is to ensure that neither accident, misreading, nor symbolic overreaction carries the system into war.

9.3 Track-Two and Track-1.5 Civilizational Dialogue

The third pathway is Track Two and Track-1.5 dialogue involving scholars, retired officials, peace researchers, public health experts, technologists, climate scientists, ethicists, physicians, legal scholars, and civil society actors.

These dialogues should not be symbolic exchanges. They should function as early-warning, scenario-testing, and repair-design spaces.

They should ask questions that formal diplomacy often avoids:

What signals are being misread by the other side?

Which technologies are compressing decision time beyond human wisdom?

Which economic dependencies are becoming coercive?

Where could a Taiwan crisis harm civilians first?

Which civil commons are most vulnerable to cyberattack, blockade, sanctions, or energy shock?

Which domains must be insulated from rivalry because they are life-critical?

The value of Track Two dialogue is that it can hold complexity before official positions harden. It can explore what governments cannot yet say publicly. It can preserve human recognition across strategic divides. It can help both societies see the other not only as adversary, but as a participant in a shared field of risk.

This does not replace diplomacy. It enlarges the field in which diplomacy becomes possible.

9.4 Regional Life-Protection Forums

The fourth pathway is regional life-protection. The Indo-Pacific must not be treated merely as a theatre of rivalry. It is a region of living societies with their own histories, needs, vulnerabilities, and agency.

ASEAN states, Pacific Island countries, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and others should not be forced into a binary alignment structure in which their primary function is to strengthen one bloc against another. They need institutional space to articulate regional life-protection priorities: climate resilience, fisheries, shipping safety, disaster response, food security, public health, maritime deconfliction, and protection from coercive economic shocks.

This is especially important for small island and coastal states. For them, security is not only military. It is sea-level rise, typhoons, debt vulnerability, fisheries collapse, food imports, tourism shocks, disease surveillance, and ecological survival. A life-coherent order must allow these realities to count as central security concerns.

The institutional repair would be a recurring Indo-Pacific Life-Protection Forum that includes states, regional organizations, public health agencies, climate bodies, disaster-response institutions, and civil society. Its purpose would be to identify civilian systems that must be protected regardless of great-power competition.

The guiding principle should be:

No region should be reduced to a theatre when it is first a home.

9.5 Civil Commons Compacts

The fifth pathway is the creation of civil commons compacts. These would identify life-critical systems that should be protected from geopolitical rivalry, cyberattack, blockade, sanctions overreach, and deliberate disruption.

Such systems include hospitals, water systems, food logistics, emergency communications, disease surveillance networks, nuclear safety systems, ports carrying humanitarian supplies, disaster-response channels, and public health laboratories.

The Strait of Hormuz crisis shows why such compacts are not idealistic extras. Reuters described the strait as a conduit for about one-fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas flows, and reported competing U.S. and Chinese accounts of whether Xi had agreed Iran

must reopen it (Hunnicutt & Choukeir, 2026). When critical civilian flows become vulnerable to war, blockade, tolling disputes, or strategic bargaining, ordinary people far from the battlefield suffer.

Civil commons compacts would not require ideological agreement between powers. They would require recognition that certain systems are too life-critical to be treated as ordinary instruments of coercion.

The principle is straightforward:

No strategic rivalry is legitimate when it deliberately disables the conditions of civilian life.

9.6 Technology Governance Pathways

The sixth pathway is technology governance. AI, semiconductors, cyber systems, autonomous weapons, satellites, drones, quantum tools, biotechnology, and surveillance infrastructures cannot be governed only by national advantage. The risks are transboundary, systemic, and often irreversible.

The Guardian reported that AI remained one of the key unresolved issues at the Beijing summit, alongside Iran and Taiwan (Hawkins & Smith, 2026). This matters because AI can affect military decision speed, cyber operations, information integrity, surveillance capacity, targeting systems, and crisis escalation.

A life-coherent technology pathway would include:

shared red lines against autonomous nuclear decision-making;

norms against cyberattacks on hospitals, water systems, food logistics, and energy grids;

AI crisis channels between major powers;

incident reporting for military AI failures or near-misses;

prohibitions on deepfake destabilization during flashpoints;

biosecurity cooperation;

and international norms limiting autonomous weapons systems.

These measures are not sufficient by themselves. But without them, technology competition may become the most accelerated form of the Thucydides Trap: each side seeking safety through superiority, and both making the shared system less safe.

9.7 Planetary Repair Benchmarks

The seventh pathway is planetary repair. The U.S.–China relationship should not be evaluated only by summit atmosphere, trade flows, military balance, or tactical concessions. It should be evaluated by whether it improves the viability of the world.

Relevant benchmarks include emissions reductions, methane cuts, clean energy deployment, climate adaptation finance, pandemic preparedness, nuclear risk reduction, ocean protection, biodiversity restoration, disaster-response cooperation, food-security stabilization, debt vulnerability relief, and AI safety agreements.

This is not moral ornamentation. It is the deepest realism. The climate system, oceans, viral ecologies, nuclear fallout, and AI instability do not respect spheres of influence. If great-power rivalry disables planetary repair, both powers lose, whatever their relative advantage.

The institutional repair would be an annual U.S.–China–Global Life-Ground Review, ideally linked to multilateral institutions and regional partners. This review would ask not only whether the two powers are avoiding war, but whether their relationship is improving or worsening the life-support systems on which the whole world depends.

9.8 Public Narrative Repair

The eighth pathway is narrative repair. Great-power rivalry is not sustained by weapons alone. It is sustained by stories: stories of humiliation, betrayal, decline, encirclement, destiny, civilizational superiority, and existential threat.

Narratives can prepare societies for restraint, or they can prepare them for war.

The Thucydides Trap itself is a narrative. Used responsibly, it warns against fatal repetition. Used irresponsibly, it assigns roles and narrows imagination. That means the frame must be handled with care.

Public narrative repair would require leaders, media institutions, educators, scholars, and civil society to resist enemy-image absolutism. It would not deny real danger. It would refuse dehumanization. It would teach publics that restraint is not weakness, that diplomacy is not surrender, that compromise is not humiliation, and that avoiding catastrophe is not failure.

A life-coherent public narrative must make one distinction unmistakable:

The other side may be a rival, but it is not outside the circle of life.

Table 4. Institutional Pathways for Life-Coherent Repair

Pathway	Primary actors	Core function	Life-coherent test
Track-One diplomacy	Heads of state, foreign ministries, embassies	Preserve communication and negotiate restraint	Does dialogue continue when trust is absent?
Military risk reduction	Defence ministries, commanders, naval and air forces	Prevent incidents from becoming crises	Does deterrence include de-escalation pathways?

Pathway	Primary actors	Core function	Life-coherent test
Track Two / Track-1.5 dialogue	Scholars, retired officials, scientists, ethicists, civil society	Explore risks before official positions harden	Does dialogue reveal misperception and repair options?
Regional life-protection forums	Regional states, ASEAN, Pacific states, public agencies	Prevent regions from becoming mere theatres	Are local societies' life-needs made visible?
Civil commons compacts	States, UN bodies, health, food, water, energy institutions	Protect life-critical systems from rivalry	Are civilian life-support systems shielded from coercion?
Technology governance pathways	Governments, AI labs, standards bodies, military and civil experts	Place life-protective constraints on high-risk technologies	Does technology preserve or degrade life-capacity?
Planetary repair benchmarks	States, multilateral institutions, climate and health bodies	Measure whether rivalry enables or disables Earth-system repair	Is the relationship improving global viability?
Public narrative repair	Leaders, media, educators, scholars, citizens	Reduce fatalism, dehumanization, and enemy-image absolutism	Does public language preserve the possibility of peace?

9.9 From Institution to Practice

Institutions matter only if they change practice. The purpose of the architecture is not to create more meetings, more communiqués, or more expert panels. It is to change the questions that guide action.

Before a military exercise, planners should ask whether the exercise strengthens deterrence without creating unnecessary escalation risk.

Before a cyber operation, governments should ask whether the target belongs to the civil commons.

Before an AI deployment, commanders should ask whether human judgment remains meaningful.

Before a sanctions package, policymakers should ask whether essential civilian systems will be harmed.

Before a public speech, leaders should ask whether their language preserves or destroys diplomatic room.

Before a Taiwan-related decision, all actors should ask whether the action protects Taiwan's people as a living society or abstracts them into a strategic object.

Before celebrating strategic advantage, great powers should ask whether the life-ground is more secure than before.

This is how life-coherent repair becomes practical: not by replacing strategy with morality, but by making strategy answerable to the living consequences it produces.

10. Conclusion

From Trap to Metanoia

The Thucydides Trap is not overcome by denying rivalry. It is overcome by refusing to let rivalry become the highest truth.

The May 2026 Beijing summit placed this challenge before the world with unusual clarity. The official Chinese readout framed the meeting around the question of whether China and the United States could overcome the Thucydides Trap, establish a new paradigm of major-country relations, and build a "constructive China-U.S. relationship of strategic stability" (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026a). Independent reporting and analysis emphasized that this language signaled an effort to stabilize rivalry, even as major danger zones — including Taiwan, Iran/Hormuz, AI, and trade — remained unresolved or only partially addressed (Channel NewsAsia, 2026; Hawkins & Smith, 2026; Hunnicutt & Choukeir, 2026).

Yet the deeper significance of the moment is not that one leader invoked an ancient historian before another. The deeper significance is that civilization itself is being asked whether it can recognize a destructive pattern before it becomes governed by it.

The conventional Thucydides question is whether a rising power and a ruling power can avoid catastrophic war. That question remains urgent. It cannot be dismissed. Nuclear weapons, Taiwan, cyber systems, AI-enabled decision environments, maritime encounters, energy chokepoints, domestic nationalism, alliance commitments, and historical grievances make the U.S.–China relationship one of the defining danger fields of the century.

But the life-coherent question is deeper.

It asks whether humanity can move beyond a security paradigm in which the safety of one people is pursued through the insecurity of another. It asks whether strategic stability can become more than the management of rivalry. It asks whether great powers can become answerable to the lives affected by their power. It asks whether Taiwan can be seen not only as a flashpoint, but as a living society. It asks whether technology can be governed before it outruns wisdom. It asks whether interdependence can be repaired before it becomes hostage-dependence. It asks whether planetary repair can become more important than national prestige.

This is the metanoia demanded by the present moment: a transformation in the structure of perception.

Metanoia does not mean sentimental harmony. It does not mean pretending that conflict, coercion, ambition, ideology, sovereignty, or deterrence no longer matter. It means seeing

them within a deeper order of responsibility. Power matters, but power is not ultimate. Strategy matters, but strategy is not sovereign. National interest matters, but national interest must be reordered within planetary life-interest. Security matters, but security remains legitimate only when answerable to life.

The argument of this white paper has therefore been simple but demanding: the true trap is not merely China rising and America fearing. The true trap is a life-blind security paradigm in which fear becomes world-making. In that paradigm, defensive acts appear aggressive, technology becomes supremacy, trade becomes leverage, interdependence becomes coercion, sovereignty becomes possession, and historical warning becomes destiny.

To escape that trap, the world needs more than guardrails. It needs repair.

It needs crisis non-escalation so that disturbance does not become catastrophe.

It needs Taiwan life-protection so that a living society is not converted into sacrificial material for symbolic victory.

It needs civil commons resilience so that food, water, energy, medicines, health systems, public knowledge, ecological buffers, and social trust are treated as the foundations of security.

It needs technology under life-protective constraint so that AI, cyber systems, autonomous weapons, surveillance infrastructures, biotechnology, and semiconductors do not accelerate systemic fragility.

It needs planetary repair diplomacy so that climate, oceans, biodiversity, public health, disaster preparedness, food security, and future generations are not subordinated to rivalry.

These are not idealistic additions to realism. They are realism deepened to the level of the life-ground.

A state cannot finally secure itself on a destabilized planet. A great power cannot ultimately win in a world of failing food systems, ecological breakdown, nuclear danger, pandemic vulnerability, brittle supply chains, poisoned public knowledge, and escalating fear. A civilization that can dominate but cannot repair is not secure. It is powerful and fragile at the same time.

The Thucydides Trap must therefore be heard as an alarm, not obeyed as a script. History offers patterns, not commandments. The past can illuminate danger, but it cannot absolve the present of responsibility. The question is not whether Athens and Sparta will repeat themselves through Washington and Beijing. The question is whether humanity can learn, at last, to interrupt the pattern before it becomes fate.

This requires a new discipline of power: power restrained by life, sovereignty disciplined by responsibility, deterrence subordinated to de-escalation, technology governed by wisdom,

interdependence redesigned as resilience, and diplomacy measured by its contribution to planetary repair.

The highest realism is no longer domination.

The highest realism is viability.

The final question, then, is not only whether China and the United States can avoid war. It is whether civilization can bring forth a world in which no people's safety depends upon another people's fear.

That is the repair now demanded of history.

Appendix A. Seven-Primitive Diagnostic Template for Great-Power Rivalry

The seven-primitive diagnostic template is designed to translate the paper's life-coherent framework into a practical tool for geopolitical assessment. It does not claim to predict war mechanically. Its purpose is to reveal where a rivalry is losing viability, where fear is narrowing the field of action, and where repair remains possible.

The template can be applied to U.S.–China relations, the Taiwan Strait, AI competition, energy chokepoints, nuclear risk, regional proxy conflicts, or other civilizational stress fields. It is grounded in the central claim of this paper: security must be judged not only by whether it protects a state, but by whether it preserves, restores, or expands life-capacity for all affected.

Table A1. Seven-Primitive Diagnostic Template for Great-Power Rivalry

Diagnostic primitive	**Guiding question**	**Great-power rivalry application**	**Repair question**
Constraint	What limits the field of possible action?	Nuclear weapons, alliances, Taiwan, sanctions, domestic nationalism, AI systems, energy chokepoints	Which constraints are material, which are symbolic, which are narrative, and which can be softened without sacrificing life?
Margin	How much buffer exists before breakdown?	Crisis communication, decision time, supply-chain slack, diplomatic trust, domestic political room	Where can time, trust, redundancy, de-escalation pathways, and face-saving off-ramps be increased?
State	What is the present condition of the system?	Stable peace, cold rivalry, high-arousal competition, crisis, escalation, open conflict	Is the field moving toward repair, managed rivalry, or breakdown?
Disturbance	What shocks could destabilize the system?	Taiwan incident, cyberattack, maritime collision,	What early-warning systems, verification

Diagnostic primitive	Guiding question	Great-power rivalry application	Repair question
		energy shock, sanctions spiral, AI error	channels, and deconfliction pathways are already in place?
Perception	How are actors interpreting each other?	Defensive self-image, aggressive other-image, historical grievance, humiliation, suspicion	What misrecognitions are narrowing the field of possibility?
Regulation	What mechanisms stabilize or correct the system?	Diplomacy, hotlines, arms control, trade frameworks, civil society dialogue, international law	Are regulators merely managing rivalry, or are they repairing its causes?
Options	What futures remain available?	War, decoupling, spheres of influence, unstable détente, managed rivalry, life-coherent repair	Which option preserves the most life-capacity across all affected?

This template should always end with the life-coherence test:

Does this action preserve, restore, or expand the conditions of life for all affected, or does it protect one actor by increasing systemic fragility for others?

This diagnostic is consistent with the paper's wider theoretical grounding. Galtung's distinction between direct violence, structural violence, negative peace, and positive peace helps clarify why the absence of war is not yet peace; structural conditions must also be repaired for life to flourish (Galtung, 1969). Ostrom's work on commons governance similarly shows that durable collective life depends on rules, monitoring, conflict-resolution mechanisms, and nested institutions rather than either domination or unmanaged extraction (Ostrom, 1990).

Appendix B. Life-Coherent Strategic Stability Indicators

A life-coherent framework requires indicators that move beyond conventional measures of military balance, trade volume, deterrence credibility, or summit atmosphere. A rivalry may appear stable while still degrading the civil commons, militarizing technology, weakening trust, or obstructing planetary repair.

The following indicators are intended to assess whether strategic stability is becoming more life-protective or merely more managed.

Table B1. Life-Coherent Strategic Stability Indicators

Domain	Conventional indicator	Life-coherent indicator
Military stability	Number of military channels, arms balance, deterrence credibility	Reliability of crisis communication; reduction in dangerous encounters; availability of face-saving off-ramps; human judgment preserved in escalation decisions
Taiwan	Arms sales, deployments, official statements, military exercises	Reduction in coercive signaling; protection of civilian continuity; avoidance of blockade scenarios; preservation of democratic life without catastrophic escalation
Technology	AI leadership, chip capacity, cyber capability, military innovation	Civilian infrastructure protections; AI safety norms; human accountability; limits on autonomous escalation; protection of public knowledge integrity
Economy	Trade balances, tariffs, investment flows, market access	Supply-chain resilience; reduced coercive dependency; protection of food, medicine, energy, and civilian logistics
Energy	Oil flows, fuel prices, strategic reserves	Diversified energy systems; reduced chokepoint

Domain	Conventional indicator	Life-coherent indicator
		vulnerability; clean-energy cooperation; protection of essential civilian access
Public health	Disease surveillance capacity, biomedical innovation	Shared pandemic preparedness; protected health infrastructure; joint rapid-response norms; antimicrobial-resistance cooperation
Climate and ecology	Emissions targets, clean-energy investment	Actual emissions reduction; adaptation support; biodiversity protection; ocean cooperation; disaster resilience
Civil commons	Infrastructure investment, emergency management plans	Water, food, health, education, communication, and disaster systems protected from rivalry and coercion
Diplomacy	Summit frequency, communiqués, working groups	Evidence that communication continues during distrust; inclusion of life-ground issues; measurable de-escalation outcomes
Narrative field	Public statements, media tone, official doctrine	Reduction of enemy images; avoidance of fatalistic war narratives; increased recognition of shared vulnerability

These indicators make visible what conventional realism often hides: the quality of stability matters. A rivalry may be stable in the narrow sense while degrading the life-support systems on which all security depends.

The indicators also help connect the paper's life-coherent approach to established literatures. McMurtry's life-value ontology evaluates systems by whether they enable or disable life-capacities rather than by money-value or power accumulation alone; this provides the normative basis for asking whether strategic stability protects life or merely preserves rivalry (McMurtry, 2013). Maturana and Varela's work on cognition and autopoiesis supports the paper's claim that political systems do not merely respond to worlds; through their distinctions and practices, they help bring forth worlds in which

certain actions become thinkable and others disappear from view (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

Appendix C. Strategic Realism and Life-Coherent Realism

The distinction between strategic realism and life-coherent realism is not a distinction between realism and idealism. It is a distinction between a narrower realism organized around threat and a deeper realism organized around viability.

Strategic realism remains necessary because coercion, military power, territorial conflict, ideology, domestic politics, alliance systems, and mistrust are real. Life-coherent realism does not deny these realities. It places them within a wider field of life-dependence.

No state survives outside air, water, soil, climate, food systems, public health, social trust, ecological stability, and future generations. A realism that ignores these conditions is not hard-headed; it is incomplete.

Table C1. Strategic Realism and Life-Coherent Realism

Strategic realism	**Life-coherent realism**
States are primary actors	States are important instruments within a wider life-field
Security means survival under threat	Security means preserving life-capacity under difference, uncertainty, and conflict
Power is the central currency	Viability is the deeper measure
Peace is absence of major war	Peace is life-serving order with reduced structural violence
Deterrence is central	Deterrence is subordinated to de-escalation and repair
Interdependence is leverage	Interdependence must become resilient, reciprocal, and non-coercive
Technology is strategic advantage	Technology must be governed by life-protective constraint
Smaller states are often theatres, buffers, or bargaining spaces	Smaller societies are living communities with intrinsic standing
National interest is ultimate	National interest is reordered within planetary life-interest
Stability means managed rivalry	Stability means conditions that allow life to continue, heal, and flourish

The purpose of this distinction is not to dismiss strategy. It is to ensure that strategy remains answerable to the living realities it affects. Allison's work on the Thucydides Trap is valuable because it makes structural fear visible and insists that war is not inevitable,

even when historical patterns are dangerous (Allison, 2017). A life-coherent framework accepts that warning, but deepens it: the question is not only whether rising and ruling powers can avoid war, but whether civilization can cease organizing safety through mutual fear.

Appendix D. Glossary of Core Terms

Thucydides Trap
A framework describing the danger that arises when a rising power threatens to displace an established power, generating fear, status anxiety, misrecognition, and possible war. The contemporary phrase was popularized by Graham Allison in relation to U.S.–China relations, drawing on Thucydides's account of the Peloponnesian War (Allison, 2017; Thucydides, n.d.).

Life-Blind Security
A security paradigm that protects state power, military advantage, economic leverage, technological supremacy, or deterrent credibility while neglecting the living conditions security is meant to serve.

Life-Coherent Security
Security defined as the shared capacity to preserve and regenerate the conditions of life under difference, uncertainty, and conflict.

Strategic Stability
A condition in which rival powers maintain enough predictability, deterrence, communication, and restraint to reduce the risk of uncontrolled escalation.

Life-Coherent Strategic Stability
A deeper form of strategic stability that not only prevents uncontrolled escalation, but also repairs the conditions that generate rivalry, coercion, fragility, and life-system damage.

Civil Commons
The shared life-support systems that make human flourishing possible: water, food, health, education, care, public knowledge, ecological protection, disaster response, social trust, and intergenerational continuity.

Hostage-Dependence
A form of interdependence in which essential systems are so vulnerable to coercion, sanctions, blockade, cyberattack, or disruption that mutual connection becomes mutual threat.

Relational Security
Security achieved not only through deterrence, but through communication, de-escalation, recognition, mutual restraint, protected off-ramps, and repair of fear-generating conditions.

Planetary Life-Interest
The shared interest of all peoples and future generations in preserving Earth's life-support

systems, including climate, oceans, biodiversity, food systems, public health, and ecological resilience.

Metanoia
A transformation in perception. In this paper, it refers to the civilizational shift from seeing security as domination of threat to seeing security as preservation of life-capacity.

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(Original work written ca. 431 BCE)

Back-Cover Synopsis

When China's president publicly invoked the Thucydides Trap before the president of the United States, an ancient warning entered the center of twenty-first-century diplomacy. But the danger is deeper than rivalry between a rising power and a ruling power. The deeper danger is a civilization still seeking security through fear, technological supremacy, coercive interdependence, and the insecurity of others.

Beyond the Thucydides Trap reframes U.S.–China rivalry as a civilizational stress test. It argues that strategic stability is necessary but insufficient unless deepened into life-coherent security: the protection of peoples, ecosystems, civil commons, and future generations. Moving from Taiwan and AI to energy, public health, climate, and planetary repair, this white paper asks whether humanity can bring forth another world before fear becomes fate.

Its central claim is simple: the highest realism is no longer domination, but viability.

Author Bio

Dr. Bichara Sahely, BSc (Biology), MBBS, DM (Internal Medicine), is a physician, systems thinker, and independent scholar from St. Kitts and Nevis. His work integrates clinical medicine, public health, peace theory, life-value ontology, autopoiesis, commons governance, ecological responsibility, and civilizational repair. Across his writings, he develops life-coherent frameworks for health, healing, governance, peace, and planetary flourishing, with a central concern for how human systems can preserve, restore, and expand life-capacity across persons, communities, institutions, ecosystems, and future generations.