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## CHAPTER 2

# US-China Relations and the Specter of Great Power War

*Michael Haas and Niklas Masuhr*

As the strategic rivalry between the US and China intensifies, militarized crises are becoming more likely and a major military conflict is no longer as remote as it once seemed. The far-reaching modernization of its armed forces has already led China to embrace a more sanguine view of how such a conflict might play out. Meanwhile, the United States is struggling to formulate a coherent response to a potential Chinese attempt to recast the regional order by force. Although war remains unlikely, the need to get real about the possibility is now more urgent than at any point in recent decades.



US Navy ordnance handlers are arming an F/A-18 fighter jet aboard the carrier USS Carl Vinson in the South China Sea, March 3, 2017. *Erik De Castro / Reuters*



After going through a period of uncertainty that lasted into the 2010s, the relationship between the US and China has been transitioning toward a new phase of openly declared and manifest strategic rivalry. Though the geo-economic aspects of this escalating competition currently dominate the public discourse, a growing body of literature points toward a further deterioration of US-China relations as a potential catalyst for militarized crises and, eventually, great power war.<sup>1</sup> The main structural cause that would drive such a development is easily identified: although the United States remains significantly more powerful globally, the two leading powers in the international system are inching towards a potential power transition in East Asia, spurred on by their fundamentally incompatible strategic visions for the future of the region. Irrespective of the eventual outcome of such a transition, which we cannot predict with any certainty, broadly similar situations have frequently – though not invariably – resulted in major wars in the past and there is reason to believe that this risk remains with us today.

While many Western observers continue to naively discount the possibility that several decades of ‘deep peace’<sup>2</sup> might come to a violent end, such hopes have been unceremoniously shattered in the past. The reality is

that war between the US and China has not only become thinkable, but it is now actively being considered and prepared for on both sides of a solidifying strategic divide. Furthermore, although the main impetus for a US-China conflict may be structural, there is no lack of potential triggers for war. Given Beijing’s firm commitment to use force to uphold its ‘One-China policy’ and the implications for Washington’s international reputation if it should fail to respond, a dispute over the future status of Taiwan is still the shortest and most direct path to major conflict. Nevertheless, a collapse of the North Korean regime, China’s highly assertive approach in the South China Sea, or a string of incidents in the East China Sea could all plausibly lead to a military confrontation between the two great powers. Regardless of the exact trigger, the consequences of such a confrontation would extend far beyond East Asia. Even if military clashes remain limited to the region, significant second and third order effects should be expected around the globe as a result of high levels of economic integration.

This chapter will contend that, based on a review of past research findings and observable trends, a US-China war can no longer be treated as a remote and implausible prospect.





Although a major conflict currently remains unlikely, the US-China relationship is set to pass through a period of maximum danger that will extend into the 2030s and likely beyond. Increased military preparations are both a rational response to that prospect and an additional source of tension going forward. As the strategic rivalry in East Asia intensifies, militarized crises will become increasingly likely and path dependencies will solidify. While early attempts at strategic conciliation or repeated successes in crisis management could render conflict a less likely outcome over time, the current trajectory of US-China relations does not evince optimism.

This chapter will firstly consider the empirical record of strategic rivalries and potential power transitions. Secondly, it will explore Beijing's evolving military calculus and analyze both US and Chinese thinking about a great power war more broadly. This review will focus on how a conflict could arise and how it might be fought. Thirdly, the chapter will also investigate factors that might mitigate the likelihood of escalation, specifically the role of nuclear weapons and the difficulty of mobilization under 21st century conditions. Finally, the chapter will close with a preliminary assessment of what to expect in the coming decade.

### **Entrenched Rivalries and Major Wars**

Wars are overwhelmingly fought among states that are already engaged in long-standing strategic rivalries. This is one of the few clear-cut empirical findings in the conflict studies literature. Like other types of international conflicts, such rivalries are marked by an incompatibility of spatial, ideological or other interests. What sets them apart, however, is their intense, enduring and most often militarized nature. As rivalries become increasingly entrenched over time, the view of one's opponent as a significant threat is cemented and both sides settle into an expectation of future antagonism. In other words, the objective and subjective foundations of the conflict have become so entangled as to render a resolution both extremely difficult and ever more unlikely in practice. It also creates a dynamic in which both sides may be more concerned with their regional and global credibility, as opposed to settling tangible points of contention. As a result, confrontations might escalate beyond what would otherwise be considered reasonable.

The effects of entrenched rivalries on the likelihood of military conflict between states are indisputable. To provide some illustrative examples of research findings in this area, a review



of 95 interstate wars fought since the 1820s demonstrates that 78% of those conflicts included states that had previously been embroiled in long-standing, militarized rivalries.<sup>3</sup> Another major quantitative study shows that of 47 interstate wars that took place in the 20th century, 87% were preceded by such entrenched rivalries.<sup>4</sup> Another foundational work in this area found that long-term strategic rivalries are easily the most war-prone of interstate relationships – a small fraction of cases that accounts “for a disproportionately large number of conflicts and wars.”<sup>5</sup> Many of these strategic rivals face off against each other in militarized crises and incidents before they end up fighting a war. And, having fought each other once, they often clash again in the years and decades that follow.

At the same time, it is also true that not all strategic rivalries result in war. In fact, while the vast majority do result in some kind of militarized dispute, only about half of those rivalries actually led to war.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, this may sound like strategic rivalry is only a weak predictor for interstate war. Upon further reflection, the proposition that a US-China war could ultimately be as likely as a coin toss should be deeply disconcerting. Recent research into a smaller subset of cases, where one of the rivals is challenging a leading power for precedence

in the international order, found even higher rates of military conflict. Of sixteen such cases examined in a research project on the so-called ‘Thucydides Trap’ – based on the Ancient Greek historian’s theory that “[t]he growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta”<sup>7</sup> caused the Peloponnesian War of 431–404 BC – twelve eventually resulted in war.<sup>8</sup>

None of this is to suggest that a US-China war is becoming inevitable or that it is as likely as statistical analyses of the historical record would intimate. All wars are individually preventable, at least in principle. Yet a manifest strategic rivalry, a looming power transition, increasingly militarized patterns of interaction, and a significant probability of future crises over stakes large and small all point to a substantial risk of military conflict between US and China. Nuclear weapons and the certainty of major economic dislocations still provide extremely powerful disincentives, but it is not clear that either of them can prevent states from engaging in conflict in all cases. This is still an uncomfortable admission to make for Western political leaders and intellectuals, who have long assured the public that great power war has been consigned to the ash heap of history. But such qualms do not make the possibility



any less real. As a result, ongoing shifts in US and Chinese military thought and increased preparations for war should be taken extremely seriously – both as a symptom of how the relationship is developing and as a potential harbinger of heightened tensions in years to come.

### **Embracing Victory**

While much has been written about China's meteoric rise from impoverished agrarian state to global economic powerhouse, the impact of its development on the military balance in East Asia has only recently begun to seep into mainstream Western public discourse. In summarizing the cumulative effects of China's military modernization since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, one recent study concludes that "the military equation in East Asia has changed dramatically."<sup>9</sup> Starting with very limited capacity, "the PLA has made tremendous strides, and the overall capability trend lines are moving against the United States. In some areas, such as ballistic missiles, fighter aircraft, and attack submarines, improvements have come with breathtaking speed by most historical standards."<sup>10</sup> Although some experts may seek to amend or qualify this statement, the basic trend is difficult to dispute: with no end in sight for the remarkable advancement of Chinese military capacity, the PLA will

soon rank in the top tier of the world's most capable military organizations. Although much work remains to be done, President Xi's publicly stated aims of "basically completing"<sup>11</sup> the PLA's modernization program by 2035 and fielding "world-class forces"<sup>12</sup> across the board by 2050 is no longer out of reach. If the situation in the region should deteriorate and military spending increases accordingly, the Chinese leadership may attempt to accelerate this process even further. This is particularly likely if China deems militarized nationalism and repeated shows of force as better insurance policies for its own survival than domestic liberalization.

Given China's recent history of unprecedented economic growth, none of this is surprising in itself. Though China's military budgets have grown considerably faster than its civilian economy, it is hardly unusual for a rising power to prioritize its security concerns. What is remarkable, however, is the extent of the corresponding shift in China's ambition. To state it bluntly, Chinese leadership is no longer seeking to merely contest US military superiority in the region or to impose costs on the leading power in case of war. Instead, the PLA has embraced outright military victory as the new benchmark for its force design, capability development, and



operational planning.<sup>13</sup> The aim of China's defense program for the 2020s and beyond is to be able to defeat the United States and its allies in a potential regional conflict. This is a highly consequential development, with implications that reach far beyond the region itself. A Chinese ability to defeat the United States militarily in regional contingencies would have momentous implications for a security order built on a US-led alliance system. It is also worrisome as we have reason to believe that "leaders select themselves into conflicts that they think they can win."<sup>14</sup> Thus, how each side *perceives* its military prowess in relation to its opponent's capabilities can have a significant shaping effect at all levels of decision-making. Perhaps the most dangerous setup, then, is one in which the US concludes that it can *still* engage in decisive military action, but not for much longer, and Chinese leaders believe that they are *already* in a position to engage in such action and overestimate their military leverage as a consequence.

As things stand, there is every reason to believe that the CCP leadership would like to avoid a military confrontation with the United States. However, the likelihood of a military clash will ultimately be shaped by the stakes of the specific conflict, not least in terms of regime security and

survival, and the degree to which the political and military top echelons see certain types of regional military conflicts as winnable. For conflicts over the most important Chinese interests, like Taiwan, the leadership's confidence will continue to grow in line with PLA capabilities. While war over Taiwan remains at the heart of Chinese military planning, the PLA is now actively preparing for a number of different contingencies. Preparations for regional wars in the South and East China Seas unrelated to the 'One-China policy' have advanced dramatically since the early 2010s. Furthermore, the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula should not be underestimated. In all of these scenarios, China's red lines are less clearly defined, and its stated interests leave greater room for interpretation.

Western observers' understanding of key Chinese strategic and military concepts, and of the operational approaches that the PLA may rely on in a major conflict, are also subject to significant limitations. For one thing, Chinese ideas about warfare appear to center on political pressure points and effects, with regime security never far from the planners' minds. The 'Three Warfares'<sup>15</sup> concept, which has made some ripples in Western strategic debate, is paradigmatic of this outlook. The concept proffers three generic



courses of action to the PLA and other instruments of state power: engage in extensive ‘shaping’ operations to steer public opinion; target the opponent’s psychological vulnerabilities; and exploit legal frameworks and norms to create a favorable context for further military or non-military initiatives. While this has been interpreted as a type of ‘hybrid warfare’, the subtleties of the Chinese approach are deserving of further examination.

With a view to high intensity conflict, the PLA appears to have embraced a paradigm of ‘systems destruction warfare’<sup>16</sup> inspired by the operational experience of Western armed forces in the 1990s – specifically the 1991 Gulf War and the 1999 Kosovo War. As such, the PLA’s doctrinal precepts are reminiscent of the effects-based operations (EBO) thinking that was prevalent in Western armed forces at the time, with some significant modifications. The PLA’s theory of victory appears to rely on the ability to induce paralysis in the opponent’s ‘system-of-systems’ architecture by disrupting key functions across all operational domains – including less traditional ones, such as space and cyberspace. Not unlike the ‘Three Warfares’ paradigm, the focus is on the informational dimension of warfare; in this case on command systems, communications, networks, and the opponent’s

will to fight. At the same time, the extent to which various other military and non-military activities would be integrated into this approach in practice remains unclear.

Assuming that a conflict with China would end up being fought primarily along conventional lines, predicting the eventual outcome has become a rather difficult proposition. There are major gaps, not only in our current assessment of the strategies and operational approaches China may employ in an East Asia conflict, but also in our understanding of potential combat outcomes across the board.<sup>17</sup> In fact, a lack of truly relevant combat experience affects not only the PLA, which has not been involved in a large-scale conflict since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. If one is prepared to concede that the United States fought Operation *Desert Storm* against a deeply inferior opponent, the US armed forces’ understanding of what a conflict against a near-peer opponent would entail is almost equally rudimentary. As a result, there is considerable potential for faulty assumptions and misperceptions of the opponent’s relative strength (or weakness) on both sides. In fact, current expectations of what such a conflict would look like may well turn out to have been totally inaccurate. While wargaming, red teaming,



experimentation, and field exercises can all be very useful in laying bare inaccurate assumptions and dispelling dangerous myths, they can only ever produce tentative results. Ultimately, these activities require that the integration of unorthodox, out-of-the-box thinking be encouraged and embraced throughout the military hierarchy – a tall order for any military organization in peacetime. Reliably predicting the capabilities and intentions of one's enemy is further complicated by the fact that military adaptation processes on both sides are creating a dynamic and fluid situation in which organizational structures, equipment, doctrine, and planning will keep evolving at least partially out of the opponent's view.

Another variable in the equation concerns how the two sides' ideas about crisis stability and escalation control will interact under pressure. US views on these matters are still shaped by Cold War experiences and take a technology-focused approach to managing instabilities. It is not clear that these traditions and preferences are neatly transferable to crises and conflicts involving China. Meanwhile, the Chinese views on managing crises have long been described as "undertheorized"<sup>18</sup>, although that may slowly be changing. It still appears, however, that Chinese observers are considerably more sanguine about actors' ability to

control escalation and stabilize crises than most Western theorists. What can be stated with some confidence is that the incumbent Chinese views embody a different set of experiences and traditions that are in no way coextensive with Cold War frameworks developed in the West. As far as conflict initiation is concerned, the impact of increasingly bullish Chinese self-perceptions should not be underestimated; as their national interests expand further into contested spheres, escalation risks are likely to further increase. As one official PLA publication has put it, if an opponent "offends our national interests, it means the enemy has already fired the first shot."<sup>19</sup>

### **Maintaining the Balance**

From the US perspective, the PLA's modernization has already significantly weakened the US position in the Western Pacific, and undermined allies' trust in Washington's military toolbox, all without a shot being fired. At least, this is the sentiment espoused by a variety of comments and publications on the current security dynamic. This is somewhat surprising, given that governments, militaries, and analysts are largely operating in an empirical vacuum. In fact, the most recent case of an approximately symmetrical air-sea campaign – the 1982 Falklands War – is now almost



40 years in the past. As such, investment priorities, published doctrines, and declaratory strategies by necessity can provide only a very rough guide to how a potential escalation may play out. They are also of limited use in revealing how exactly the two sides' strengths and weaknesses may interact. Having said that, on the virtual scoresheet of military analysis, the US is currently in danger of finding itself outmaneuvered.

The reasons for the US' perceived decline in military advantages vis-à-vis China are difficult to explain without reference to multiple analytical levels. The *US Army Training and Doctrine Command* argues that Russia and China in particular have found ways to leverage broader societal global trends, such as increased interconnectedness and a diffusion of military technology.<sup>20</sup> Other analysts isolate a critical weakness in the US military system: an entrenched lack of willpower to deploy armed forces abroad in more intensive combat operations. They argue that, when deterrence failed in the past, it was not so much due to a perceived lack of US military capability but a lack of political will.<sup>21</sup>

Focusing mainly on military factors, one can distinguish three problem clusters for the US, both self-inflicted and at least partly induced by Chinese

modernization efforts. The first is the atrophy of peer-on-peer combat capabilities, primarily due to aging equipment and a lack of training for high-intensity confrontations. Most major US conventional weapons systems in use have their origins in the 1970s and 1980s, designed with the challenges of that era in mind. Likewise, training and tactical innovation in support of conventional campaigns within the Navy and Air Force was heavily downgraded while the US fought two extended counterinsurgency campaigns in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

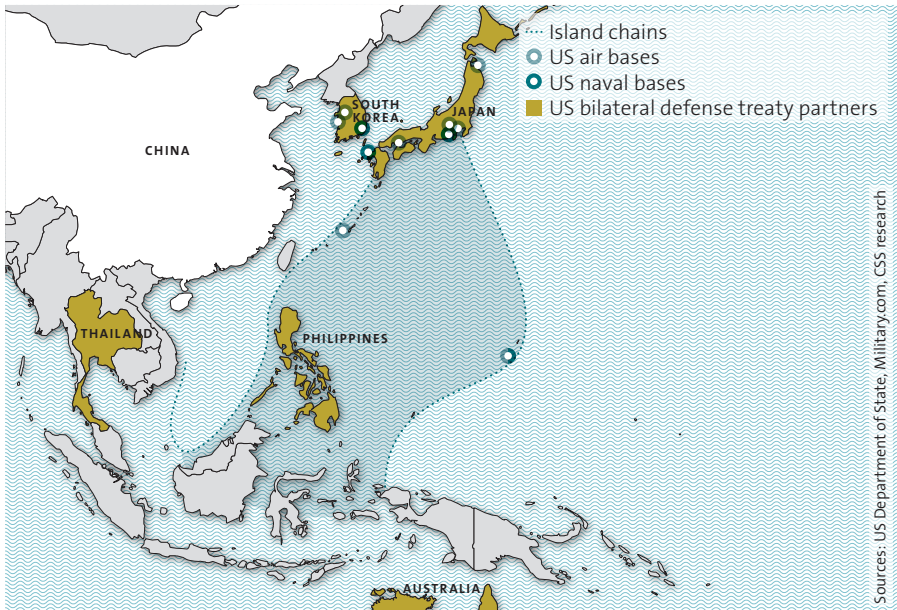
The second cluster concerns how the PLA leverages these weaknesses and exploits temporary blind spots, in a way seeking to become 'specialists' in fighting the United States. Thanks to China's acquisition of considerable long-range precision capabilities, many assumptions underpinning American military power (and thus strategic credibility) have been undermined. For instance, China has invested significant resources toward developing the capability to strike US bases in Japan and the Western Pacific with both ballistic and cruise missiles. It has also developed capabilities to paralyze the United States' ability to react and introduce follow-on forces into the area, including – but not limited to – the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile.<sup>23</sup> Current technological



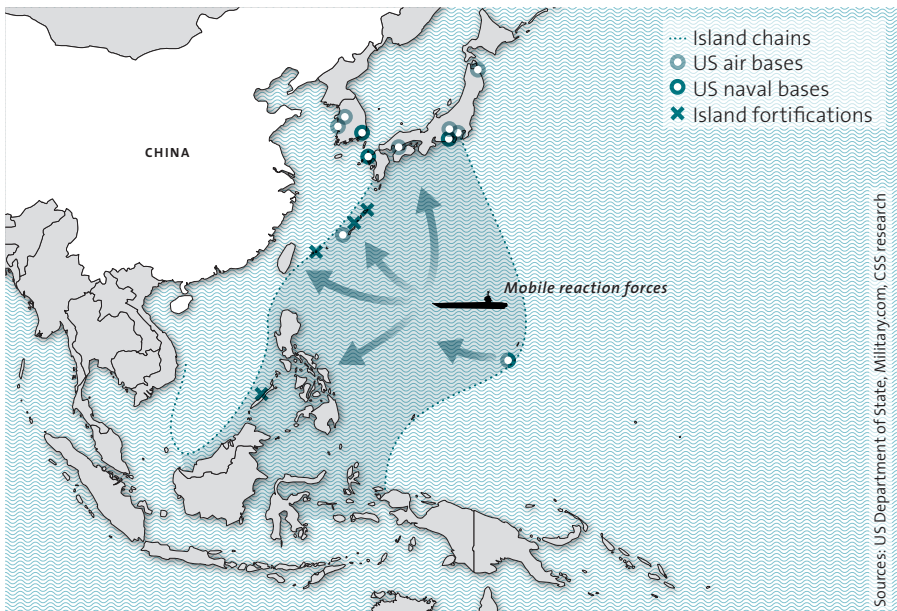


## US Strategic Options in the Western Pacific

### Strategic setting



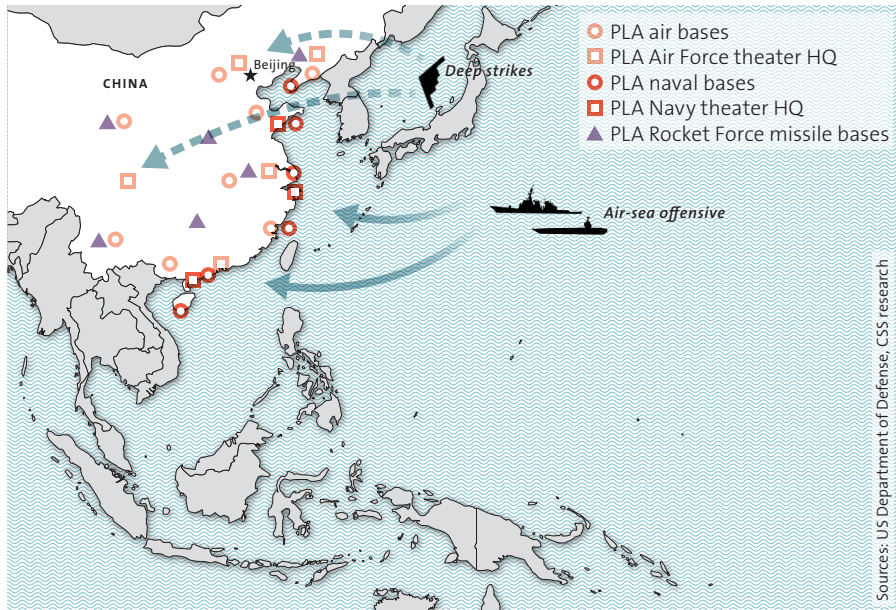
### Maritime containment



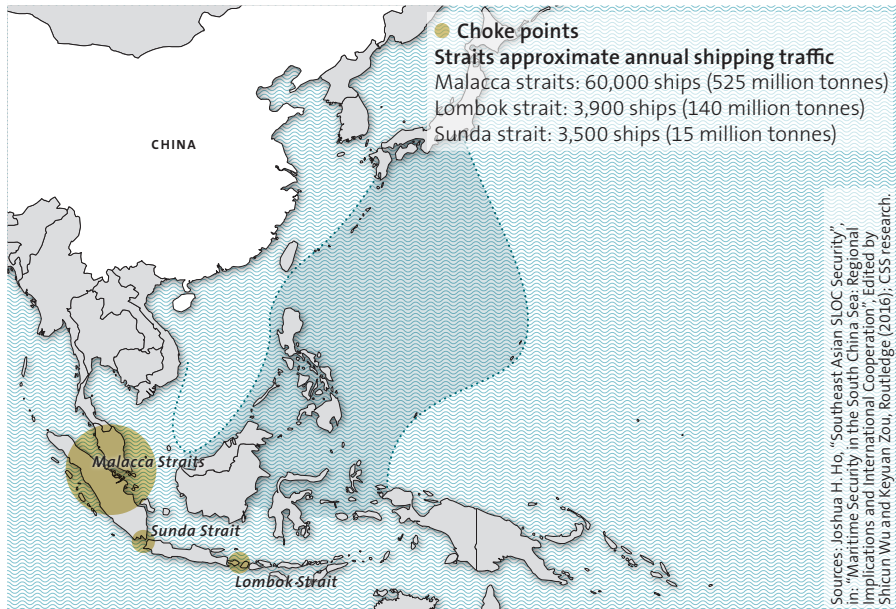




## At-source offensive



## Offshore control





developments are likely to reinforce this dynamic, as the People's Republic is investing heavily in research and testing of hypersonic glide vehicles and other advanced missile designs.<sup>24</sup>

This undermines a key component of Washington's preferred way to fight wars; namely, to assemble sufficient forces in a sanctuary and then overwhelm a regional enemy at a time of its own choosing.<sup>25</sup> There are many more examples of Chinese strategy that removes or threatens some of the advantages US (and allied) forces have gotten accustomed to after the Cold War. Such luxuries include the freedom from electronic interference, largely uncontested air dominance, and opponents that lack modern intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance capabilities.

The third problem cluster combines these elements. In isolation, remedies for the impediments discussed above appear straight-forward: bases can be hardened against Chinese strikes, training procedures can be modified, and new conventional weapons systems can be designed to meet contemporary challenges. However, there is no clean slate in military adaptation – it is not possible to design a 'peer-on-peer' force from scratch. Instead, a legacy force has to be retooled within an increasingly uncertain international and

domestic environment. In this shifting context, Middle Eastern counterinsurgencies and other lower-end contingencies are increasingly viewed as voluntary distractions from the natural task of confronting China.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding the validity of this claim, it is a fact that US armed forces remain heavily engaged in Europe, the Middle East and Africa – regions that may be of secondary importance relative to the Western Pacific but of increasing interest to Beijing as well. Ushering in a new era of focused military adaptation while engaging in security provision and deterrence operations elsewhere is a challenge that requires far more than new military hardware.

Within the US defense and security establishment, discussions over the most effective way to respond to a military escalation with China center on three main options. The approaches vary in terms of their proximity to the Chinese mainland and in terms of the mechanisms that are expected to succeed in deterring, or in a worst case scenario winning, a conflict. The first solution advances paralyzing the PLA's military potential by striking its command and control infrastructure on the mainland. The second presupposes that it is sufficient to contain Beijing's forces within the First Island Chain, as the PLA may not be able to



achieve its ambitious objectives even without offensive US interference. The third option focuses on strangling China's economy by enacting a distant blockade that leverages US global maritime superiority and its existing political and military footprint.

To paralyze the PLA's military potential, the US may choose to launch operations into the near seas bordering the Chinese mainland, in order to defeat (or sufficiently decimate) China's naval capabilities close to or in its ports. Concurrently, this approach necessitates disabling the PLA's assumed high degree of centralized planning and operational execution by targeting command, control, communications, and selected offensive capabilities that are located on the mainland. In theory, such strikes would both impede or eliminate the ability of PLA front-line forces to coordinate their efforts across the theatre and disrupt the flow of information from sensors to counter-intervention systems stationed in the interior. US planners espousing this approach argue for the operational and tactical superiority of US forces over their Chinese counterparts once the PLA is deprived of centralized leadership and coordination. The strategy also appears to mirror some prominent aspects of previous US interventions, principally against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1990 and 2003.

In both cases, deep strikes depriving the adversary's high command of its ability to meaningfully coordinate and react were considered key to asserting operational dominance early in the conflicts. By striking the mainland, the US would hope to inflict unacceptable damage to China's immediate military prospects and potentially cripple the PLA's ability to engage in any further aggression.

Another appealing characteristic of this offensive approach is its clear signaling value – allies such as Japan and Taiwan would, in theory, be reassured by US plans to penetrate the First Island Chain and galvanized to engage Chinese forces themselves. That being said, the offensive strike option is regarded as highly escalatory and would actually undermine US deterrence efforts. For one, the PLA has fused the command architectures of its conventional and nuclear long-range strike forces, meaning that degrading its counter-intervention and interdiction capabilities would also weaken its nuclear deterrent. As a result, Beijing might feel forced to employ nuclear weapons against the US or its allies for fear of losing their ability to do so permanently. Secondly, this approach could undermine the United States' broader political objectives given its potential disproportionality; it cannot be scaled down



to react to sub-conventional or covert aggression. It is a package deal that relies on overwhelming firepower and swift execution.

The second approach to a conflict with China deliberately avoids such deep, offensive strikes and instead seeks to contain Chinese naval forces between the mainland and the First Island Chain. In part, this approach aims to render China's counter-intervention arsenal moot by staying outside the Chinese navy's most effective ranges. As a result, the First Island Chain would form the main frontline of US forces, consisting of Marine and ground forces seizing islands and atolls and swiftly turning them into anti-air and anti-ship 'firing bases' in their own right, thereby constraining PLA movements. In such a scenario, the area up to the Second Island Chain would be somewhat protected from incursions by Chinese surface and air assets and allow US and allied forces to organize a mobile reserve.<sup>27</sup> Both the US Army and Marine Corps are presently in the process of rebuilding their ability to seize, build up and defend small islands and atolls in support of a wider naval campaign.<sup>28</sup>

The third option, offshore control, relies on a similar logic as the defensive strategy described above. Its main assumption is that China's economy,

and consequently its long-term prospects and political stability, are tied to maritime trade routes that help satisfy its hunger for energy resources. This would widen the contest beyond the contested area, in a strategy of 'horizontal escalation.' It takes a wider geographic view, seeking to leverage the US' global superiority in order to directly or indirectly block China-bound deliveries. China's dependence on a series of maritime chokepoints of global importance is well known, with an estimated 70% of its oil imports transiting through Singapore and the Malacca Strait. For some analysts, these chokepoints are seen as a major driving force behind the continental component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>29</sup> While horizontal escalation is considered appealing by some, predominantly civilian analysts note serious problems with the strategy. Firstly, relying on the Chinese economy to run out of gas before the PLA has achieved its military objectives may not be viable if the stakes are high enough. Secondly, it assumes a degree of discrimination and sophistication in economic warfare that seems unrealistic. The prospect of surgically removing China from the global energy market via naval boarding parties and political pressure on third countries, without incurring diplomatic backlash elsewhere or causing



economic dislocation in potentially unstable regions, appears particularly far-fetched.<sup>30</sup> This does not imply that economic warfare and offshore control could not play a meaningful role in US containment or wartime measures. However, the political cost associated with rash and unilateral economic blockades could prove prohibitive.

### **Nuclear Weapons and Future Crises**

Even if the substantial human, economic, and political costs both sides would incur in a conventional conflict are disregarded, nuclear escalation resulting in catastrophic damage to both societies as well as those of regional allies is still a possibility. It has long been argued that even a moderate risk of nuclear war should be sufficient to make the deliberate initiation of major wars between nuclear-armed states highly unlikely.<sup>31</sup> China's nuclear posture rests on the related concept of minimum nuclear deterrence. In other words, while US planners are convinced that nuclear deterrence is difficult to maintain and requires a large and diversified nuclear arsenal, Chinese planners have assumed that it is relatively easy. This is reflected in the small number of nuclear weapons that the PLA has produced. According to a recent estimate, the Chinese have roughly 290 warheads, less than half of which are believed to be assigned to intercontinental-range delivery

systems.<sup>32</sup> Although China has begun to modernize and diversify its nuclear forces and may well end up doubling the number of warheads in its arsenal, the United States will still enjoy a considerable margin of nuclear superiority even in the longer term.

At its most basic, this state of affairs can be interpreted in two ways: If China's relative confidence in its limited deterrent is justified, the United States' advantage in strategic nuclear weapons would be largely immaterial. As long as even a few weapons survive an attack, nuclear deterrence will be maintained. On the other hand, if such optimism is misplaced and nuclear deterrence is more fragile than Chinese planners have long believed, US nuclear superiority matters, and China may find itself in a more vulnerable position than its leadership has generally believed. The United States may consequently enjoy a degree of escalation dominance over its potential adversary and the deterrent effect of the PLA's nuclear capabilities would be attenuated accordingly. This could allow the US armed forces to operate with more latitude than would otherwise be possible and to cross some Chinese red lines without triggering a nuclear response, perhaps including attacks against targets on the Chinese mainland. In such a scenario, the ability of the Chinese arsenal to



stabilize crises or to provide interwar deterrence looks much more dubious.

To further complicate matters, if China's minimum deterrent is robust and the asymmetries between the two actors' nuclear postures do not matter greatly, the risk of sub-conventional or conventional military action still remains. This would be a result of the so-called 'stability-instability paradox', which purports that stable and mutual nuclear deterrence could allow both sides to get away with risky crisis behavior and military initiatives that remain below the threshold for a full-scale nuclear response. This threshold may be high enough to allow for high-intensity conventional operations – and even if it ultimately is not, one or both sides might mistakenly assume that it is. In fact, Chinese planners appear to believe that most plausible military conflicts in East Asia would not warrant the use of nuclear weapons by either side, and that escalation risks during conventional conflict can be controlled.<sup>33</sup> US planners are more reluctant to openly state their belief that conventional war between nuclear powers is possible, but given the relative lack of attention to nuclear matters in the US debate about military options in a war with China, they seem to implicitly agree with this assessment. In other words, there is a marked tendency on both

sides to think about a future great power war in primarily conventional terms and to view the nuclear realm as separate from, and by and large unrelated to, conventional war-fighting approaches.

Given the persistent asymmetries between US and Chinese approaches to nuclear deterrence and their very different nuclear 'traditions', which remain largely unsynchronized, nuclear deterrence is not necessarily the dependable mechanism for war prevention and crisis management than the Cold War experience would suggest. This is actually further accentuated by the increased prominence of 'grey zone' scenarios just short of war, which are now seen as a logical 'entry level' stage of escalation, with more conventional military operations as a potential next step. In such a scenario, a major conflict might get underway with both sides believing that they are embarking on something less than a full-scale war, only to discover that the remaining off-ramps have been missed and further escalation has become the only politically viable course of action for at least one of them.

### **The Challenge of Mobilization**

Both actors' limited ability to mobilize a 21st century, globalized economy for long-term war may also shape





the decision to engage in sustained combat operations. In a great power war characterized by high lethality and concomitant attrition rates, the task of marshalling and deploying the next wave of combat forces, and the wave after that, becomes increasingly more complex. Here fundamental issues of how the war effort is managed come into play: who replaces veteran forces and how quickly can reserves be trained and brought up? How quickly can complex platforms such as aircraft carriers and intricate organizations like armored brigades be replaced? And how does one ensure a steady flow of adapted and improved technologies from the civilian industry to the front lines? Since at least the later stages of the Cold War, a key tenet of US and allied military planning has been to offset the importance of mass – that is, the number of troops and platforms – with a much higher quality per system. A core element of this task is increasing weapons accuracy and sensor fidelity in order to engage and destroy targets further away, quicker, and with less ammunition. Yet, as has been demonstrated in preceding sections, precision-guided munitions and elaborate reconnaissance and targeting complexes are no longer the exclusive domain of the US armed forces. Accordingly, unprecedented attrition on both sides would have to be expected.













Economic interdependence and globalization massively complicate the issue in this regard. The situation appears to favor the Chinese, based on the decline of the US manufacturing sector (including arms) and the increasing complexity of major conventional weapons systems. The Pentagon is now relying on a highly consolidated and specialized industrial base that may lack the ability to fulfill all the US armed forces' needs in a conventional war. This is not limited to heavy industry, though the drawbacks of a liberalized and consolidated arms manufacturing market are particularly salient here. With the requisite infrastructure in fields such as shipbuilding at a low, the available workforce has also declined. The United States would not be able to replace major weapons systems on a directly proportional basis, unlike during the Second World War when a large civilian industrial sector could be converted to producing military supplies and platforms. Instead, the US might have to rely on rapidly produced stop-gap systems, including cheap platforms such as missile boats and up-armored and up-gunned wheeled vehicles.

The same logic applies not only to major conventional platforms but also to long-range precision-guided munitions. While the US government aims to increase its stockpiles












## US and Chinese Military Capabilities 2010 – 2020

2020 numbers represent total legacy and newly commissioned systems minus decommissioned and lost systems














US Naval Capabilities		2010		2020
	Cruisers	22		22
	Destroyers	56	13	69
	Frigates	23	17	19
	Aircraft carriers	11	1	11
	Tactical submarines	57	12	53
	Strategic submarines	14		14
	Amphibious assault ships	31	7	32
	Fighter aircraft <sup>1</sup>	1,158	197	1,133
	5th Gen fighter aircraft <sup>1</sup>	0	111	111
	Maritime patrol aircraft	159	87	119
	Airborne early warning and control	72	32	82
	Marines <sup>2</sup>	170,000		152,000

### US Air Force Capabilities<sup>3</sup>







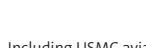
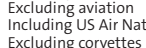
	Fighter and ground attack aircraft	2,383	173	1,566
	5th Gen fighter aircraft	139	254	393
	Intelligence and reconnaissance	106	4	86
	Bombers	135		119
	Stealth bombers	19	1	20
	Strategic transport	285		232
	Tactical transport	435		257
	Tankers	512	22	411
	Airborne early warning and control	54		31





Chinese Naval Capabilities		2010	2020
	Cruisers	0	1
	Destroyers	28	33
	Frigates	52	52
	Corvettes	0	42
	Aircraft carriers	0	2
	Tactical submarines	62	56
	Strategic submarines	3	4
	Amphibious assault ships	1	6
	Coastal patrol and attack craft <sup>4</sup>	n/a	690
	Militarized fishing vessels	0	84
	Fighter aircraft	222	283
	Maritime patrol aircraft	4	18
	Marines	10,000	25,000

### Chinese Air Force Capabilities

	Fighter and ground attack aircraft	1,383	1,671
	5th Gen fighter aircraft	0	22
	Intelligence and reconnaissance	120	55
	Bombers <sup>5</sup>	132	211
	Strategic transport	20	28
	Tactical transport	68	42
	Tankers	10	13
	Airborne early warning and control	8	13

- 1 Including USMC aviation
- 2 Excluding aviation
- 3 Including US Air National Guard
- 4 Excluding corvettes
- 5 Including naval bombers

Sources: IISS, US Congressional Research Service, CSS research



of land-attack and anti-ship missiles, they also require an elaborate support system of sensing, command, and launch platforms. The costs associated with guided munitions also increase very substantially at longer ranges. As part of the modernization of the PLA, the People's Republic already benefits from a strong industrial base, in part because it has absorbed US manufacturing capability, in the area of heavy industries in particular. It would thus be in a much better position to replace frontline systems, at least as far as deploying additional units was concerned. In addition, as a result of its whole-of-government approach to war and the legacy of Mao's 'People's War', Beijing is continuously improving upon its national mobilization model. While this does not mean that it would out-mobilize the US during a given conflict, the authoritarian nature of its state-capitalist system may provide an advantage.

The major disadvantage for the United States, however, is only revealed once strategic geography is considered. As its currently conceived, a war would not seek the destruction or unconditional surrender of the adversary but to secure a favorable hierarchy of powers and its mechanisms in maritime East Asia. As such, mobilization concerns do give an advantage to the People's Republic, as its forces would

be regenerated in proximity to the contested zones. In other words, once US forces had been depleted through attrition, its replacements would first have to be assembled and then transferred across the Pacific Ocean. This delay would provide the PLA with time to regenerate and reassemble, and to pressure Washington's regional allies. As a result, the US would find itself overly reliant on strategic assets like its nuclear arsenal and cyber capabilities. Unfortunately, they alone may prove ill-suited to flexibly and meaningfully affect a multi-faceted conflict.

Its geographic proximity to the most probable theaters also advantages the PLA, as the Chinese do not rely as heavily on highly exposed air and naval assets. In a missile-based conflict, reconnaissance and launch sites based on the Chinese mainland have numerous advantages over expensive, mobile platforms – ranging from easier hardening and concealment to larger stockpiles of munitions. As a result, China's coastal and inland territory offer a more reliable base for conducting long-range exchanges, especially given the volume of missiles that will likely be required to saturate American targets in the region.<sup>34</sup>

### **Will Great Power War Return?**

This chapter has made the case that a US-China war can no longer be



treated only as a theoretical possibility and that any complacency in this regard should be reexamined in light of recent events and well-documented historical patterns. In Europe, in particular, such complacency remains widespread. While it is entirely possible that the current period of relative peace among the great powers will survive into the 2030s and beyond, such an outcome cannot be taken for granted. Even today, the US-China rivalry shares key features of earlier war-prone geopolitical constellations, including structural pressures for more confrontational behavior, a looming power transition phase with a highly uncertain outcome, and a range of potential triggers for military conflict. While war still remains unlikely, there are a number of plausible pathways ending in military conflict in the next two decades. Some of these pathways do not require a deliberate decision to escalate to a full-scale military confrontation – even a series of minor miscalculations could eventually lead to a disastrous outcome.

China will continue to see a war against the US and its regional allies as the pacing scenario for its military expansion and will prepare accordingly. Even if the United States were to embrace a more isolationist course of action, the PLA might instead pivot to strengthen its offensive capabilities

vis-à-vis Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam in particular. In either case, the coming decade will see the PLA inching closer towards its stated aim of becoming a fully modern force, enabled by its own version of a networked, ‘system-of-systems’ paradigm. At the very least, it is likely to attain the ability to disrupt US influence and effectively counter military operations occurring within reach of the Chinese mainland. This in turn will increase the Chinese leadership’s confidence that US forces in the region can be neutralized. At the same time, continued modernization will create new vulnerabilities that may not be immediately apparent to the Chinese side, but that may in turn increase US commanders’ confidence that the threat posed by the PLA can still be countered. Episodic military standoffs and potentially lethal incidents may come to serve as an indicator of readiness, and will influence future force design on both sides.

US force planning remains preoccupied with the current generation of PLA capabilities but has yet to prepare for a future incarnation of the PLA that is able to field first-rate forces and could seek to defeat in-theater US forces outright. The US will likely move towards a military posture that is even more squarely focused on China to counter this emerging threat. In



doing so, it may degrade its military superiority on a global scale, with implications for other theaters like in the Middle East, Europe, Sub-Saharan and Northern Africa, and Latin America. Simultaneously, a weakening global position may feed into a ‘power transition paranoia’ in Washington, which may have the most pernicious consequences of all.

As a result of these overlapping and closely interrelated developments, the probability of militarized crises will further increase. With every such crisis, the possibility of war will loom larger, even if it is followed by a period of apparent détente. This can prompt the installation of effective crisis management mechanisms, and a recognition that war must be avoided even at the cost of sacrificing or compromising cherished interests. However, repeated crises can also lead to the assumption that war is ultimately unavoidable. While European observers in particular appear to have forgotten just how quickly such scenarios can turn from theoretical possibility into brutal reality, their own history offers little comfort in this regard.

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