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ANALYSIS

How to Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense

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In the U.S. military, at least, the “pivot” to Asia has begun. By 2020, the navy and the air force plan to base 60 percent of their forces in the Asia-Pacific region. The Pentagon, meanwhile, is investing a growing share of its shrinking resources in new long-range bombers and nuclear-powered submarines designed to operate in high-threat environments.

These changes are clearly meant to check an increasingly assertive China. And with good reason: Beijing’s expanding territorial claims threaten virtually every country along what is commonly known as “the first island chain,” encompassing parts of Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan—all of which Washington is obligated to protect. But to reliably deter Chinese aggression, the Pentagon will have to go even further. Emerging Chinese capabilities are intended to blunt Washington’s ability to provide military support to its allies and partners. Although deterrence through the prospect of punishment, in the form of air strikes and naval blockades, has a role to play in discouraging Chinese adventurism, Washington’s goal, and that of its allies and partners, should be to achieve deterrence through denial—to convince Beijing that it simply cannot achieve its objectives with force.

Leveraging the latent potential of U.S., allied, and partner ground forces, Washington can best achieve this objective by establishing a series of linked defenses along the first island chain—an “Archipelagic Defense”—and, in so doing, deny Beijing the ability to achieve its revisionist aims through aggression or coercion.