

CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

REINFORCING THE FRONT LINE U.S. DEFENSE STRATEGY AND THE RISE OF CHINA



EVAN BRADEN MONTGOMERY

REINFORCING THE FRONT LINE

U.S. DEFENSE STRATEGY AND THE RISE OF CHINA

EVAN BRADEN MONTGOMERY

CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

2017

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND BUDGETARY ASSESSMENTS (CSBA)

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resource allocation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evan Braden Montgomery is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, where he focuses on grand strategy, alliance management, nuclear policy, and East Asia security issues. He has published numerous CSBA reports, including *The Future of America's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent* and *Extended Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age: Geopolitics, Proliferation, and the Future of U.S. Security Commitments*. He is also the author of the book *In the Hegemon's Shadow: Leading States and the Rise of Regional Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), as well as articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *International Security*, *Security Studies*, and the *Journal of Strategic Studies*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is grateful to Eric Edelman, Andrew Krepinevich, and Tom Mahnken for their comments on this report and to Kamilla Gunzinger for editing and production support. The opinions and analysis in this study are those of the author; any shortcomings are solely the responsibility of the author.

CSBA receives funding from a broad and diverse group of funders, including private foundations, government agencies, and corporations. A complete list of these organizations can be found on our website at www.csbaonline.org/about/contributors.

Cover: U.S. Department of Defense Photo

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
Strategy in a Changing Security Environment	i
Putting China's Military Rise in Perspective	ii
In Defense of Forward Defense	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: STRATEGY IN A CHANGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT	7
The Evolution of U.S. Strategy	8
The Enduring Relevance of U.S. Strategy	10
The Emerging Challenges to U.S. Strategy	11
Conclusion	14
CHAPTER 2: PUTTING CHINA'S MILITARY RISE IN PERSPECTIVE	17
The Different Dimensions of China's Coercive Power	18
China's Land-Based Missile and Air Forces	21
China's Information Warfare Capabilities	24
China's Undersea and Surface Naval Fleets	26
Conclusion	29
CHAPTER 3: IN DEFENSE OF FORWARD DEFENSE	31
Alternative Defense Strategies in the Asia-Pacific Region	32
Assessing Denial, Punishment, and Rollback	34
Adapting Forward Defense to Manage the Rise of China	36
Conclusion	39
CONCLUSION	41
LIST OF ACRONYMS	42

Executive Summary

With some of the world's largest economies, most vital sea lanes, and closest U.S. allies, the Asia-Pacific is quickly becoming the core of today's international system. It is also home to the first new great power of the twenty-first century: the People's Republic of China (PRC). Managing China's rise will not be easy. In recent years, Beijing has been modernizing its military forces, acting more assertively, and raising the risk of escalation, especially with respect to territorial disputes throughout its near seas. The purpose of this report, therefore, is to outline the key elements of a U.S. defense strategy for the region—one that is based on the enduring grand strategy of global leadership and engagement but also recognizes the new challenges posed by China's growing military power.

Strategy in a Changing Security Environment

For approximately 70 years, the grand strategy of the United States has been defined by a set of core objectives: preventing hostile actors from dominating key regions along the rimland of Eurasia, protecting allies that have taken shelter under the U.S. security umbrella, and providing public goods that underpin a liberal economic order. With several revisionist powers attempting to carve out spheres of influence along their peripheries, these principles continue to be relevant today. Nevertheless, upholding them is more difficult now because the corresponding military strategy of forward defense is becoming harder to sustain. Unlike in previous eras, the United States must address very capable potential competitors in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Thanks to the proliferation of conventional precision-strike systems, these competitors are also gaining the ability to impose significant costs on U.S. forces without resorting to irregular warfare or nuclear escalation. The situation is particularly stark in East Asia. Although Washington has local partners that can help to counterbalance the PRC should it attempt to dominate the region, none of China's neighbors are strong enough to preserve stability on their own, and tensions among them make serious collaboration a remote possibility absent U.S. pressure. Moreover, China's military modernization puts it at the forefront of security challenges to the United States.

Putting China's Military Rise in Perspective

In recent years, China has been enhancing the survivability and reach of its nuclear forces, increasing the quality of its ground forces, and deploying naval forces outside its home region with more regularity. It has also invested in paramilitary capabilities such as a large coast guard fleet, which it can use to challenge the status quo while reducing the likelihood of escalation, and it has built new island outposts in the South China Sea. More importantly, it has been developing the tools to support an anti-access/area-denial or “counter-intervention” strategy. This includes a variety of land-attack, sea-denial, anti-air, and counter-C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) capabilities such as highly accurate ballistic and cruise missiles; an increasingly modern air force; and sophisticated anti-satellite, cyber attack, and electronic warfare systems. These tools could be used to directly threaten the main pillars of contemporary U.S. air and maritime power projection: large theater bases, high-signature combat and combat support assets, and complex information networks. That, in turn, could enable China to secure its maritime flank, control disputed territory inside the first island chain, and engage in creeping expansion more freely. Meeting the challenges posed by the PRC's conventional military capabilities, and particularly its counter-intervention capabilities, should therefore be the chief focus of the United States. Not only do these capabilities represent the most significant potential threat to the United States and its allies over the long run, but they also enable or underpin other possible risks that Washington could face in the region.

In Defense of Forward Defense

How can the United States sustain its grand strategy and achieve its core objectives under these conditions? The answer to this question rests in large part on the defense strategy it chooses and its ability to implement that strategy effectively. To date, Washington's preferred option in critical regions like East Asia can be described broadly as “forward defense”: preparing to counter threats when and where they materialize rather than responding directly long after aggression has occurred or responding indirectly by imposing costs in other theaters. Of course, the specific features of forward defense have varied at different times and in different places. Nevertheless, by clearly and credibly signaling that the United States will oppose an adversary's aims and come to the assistance of its allies, forward defense has underpinned both deterrence and assurance—and, as a result, has underwritten stability in the regions where it matters most. Looking ahead, forward defense remains the best approach for the United States in the Asia-Pacific. This is due to the high stakes involved as well as the negative consequences that could result if Washington opted for a delayed response or planned for a peripheral campaign. Although critics of forward defense have made the case for other strategies, these alternatives would have significant downsides that could jeopardize U.S. interests in the region and heighten the prospects for local instability. The United States will have to adapt its defense strategy to manage new operational challenges, for instance, by better integrating land power—particularly land-based precision strike systems—with its

concepts for air and maritime power projection. Specifically, building up land-based missile forces could simultaneously present China with many of the operational challenges that the United States now confronts and provide a clear signal to local allies that Washington does not intend to pull back from the region.

Introduction

As the new administration enters office and surveys the strategic landscape, it will immediately be confronted with major security challenges across the globe, all of which will vie for policymakers' time and attention. In Europe a string of terrorist attacks across several nations, and growing domestic opposition to continental integration have placed major strains on some of Washington's most important partners. At the same time, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is beginning to refocus on collective defense and reinforce its vulnerable eastern front as Russia becomes more aggressive and builds up its irregular, conventional, and nuclear warfighting capabilities. In the Middle East, the United States continues to degrade the Islamic State from the air and support local forces as they retake lost territory on the ground. Meanwhile, the civil war in Syria shows few signs of winding down and relations with Iran remain tense. Finally, in the Asia-Pacific, U.S. policymakers face a pair of urgent tasks. Not only must they deter a nuclear-armed North Korea from initiating or provoking a conflict, but they also need to dissuade an increasingly powerful China from upending the status quo through intimidation, coercion, or fait accompli.

Although events in Europe and the Middle East could take precedence at the outset of a new administration, there are strong reasons to expect that the Asia-Pacific will be its highest priority over the long run. With some of the world's largest economies, most vital sea lanes, and closest U.S. allies, not to mention its most well-armed rogue nation, the region is quickly becoming the core of today's international system. It is also home to the first new great power of the twenty-first century: the People's Republic of China.¹

Thanks to decades of growth, the PRC has overtaken Japan in gross domestic product (GDP) to become the world's second-biggest economy. If current projections prove accurate, it will further narrow the gap with the United States in the years ahead and might even secure the

¹ On the causes and potential consequences of China's rise, see David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); C. Fred Bergsten et al., *China's Rise: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics/Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009); Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); and Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015).

top spot, although Beijing will still lag behind Washington in other key economic indicators, such as GDP per capita and national wealth.² This transformation has also underwritten a wide-ranging program of military adaptation, modernization, and reform. Whereas China's armed forces once posed a relatively modest threat to local adversaries such as Taiwan and major powers in East Asia such as Japan, let alone the United States, that is no longer the case. Regional military powers have seen many of their longstanding advantages substantially erode as China has transitioned from a manpower-intensive and technologically inferior continental power to a more streamlined and sophisticated "composite" power—one that is increasingly focused on the maritime domain.³ As for the United States, it can no longer count on the ability to project air and naval power along China's periphery with near impunity, whether to defend its many allies or maintain an open international economy.

In short, a significant power shift is taking place within the region and, to a lesser extent, across the globe.⁴ The implications of these geopolitical changes will depend on China's actions now that it enjoys a more favorable position as well as how the United States, its allies, and the broader international community respond.

Given the long history of conflicts between established and emerging powers, some experts have warned that the United States and China might find themselves in a "Thucydides trap," or a situation in which mutual fear, opposing interests, and a competition for influence make a direct clash more likely.⁵ Although these concerns seemed exaggerated just a few short years ago, when the consensus in Washington strongly favored a strategy of engagement, they are starting to become much more difficult to dismiss. Until the global financial downturn that struck in 2008 and the Great Recession that followed, Beijing appeared determined to rise peacefully if possible; that is, to gradually enhance its economic and military strength without triggering serious counterbalancing that could derail its ascent.⁶ Yet recent events have cast Sino–U.S. relations in a much harsher light. As one expert has commented, "U.S.–China relations are worse today than they have been since the normalization of relations, and East Asia today is less stable than at any time since the end of the Cold War."⁷ China has been

2 See, for example, Jeanna Smialek, "These Will Be the World's 20 Largest Economies in 2030," *Bloomberg Business*, April 10, 2015. China already has the world's largest GDP if the purchasing power parity metric is used to measure the size of national economies.

3 Toshi Yoshihara, "Chinese Maritime Geography," in Thomas G. Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal, eds., *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 48.

4 On the dynamics of global versus regional power shifts, see Evan Braden Montgomery, *In the Hegemon's Shadow: Leading States and the Rise of Regional Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

5 Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap," in Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller, eds., *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.–China Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014).

6 Avery Goldstein, "An Emerging China's Emerging Grand Strategy: A Neo-Bismarckian Turn?" in G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), and Thomas J. Christensen, "Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy Toward East Asia," *International Security* 31, no. 1, Summer 2006, pp. 83, 98–99, 104.

7 Robert Ross, quoted in Simon Denyer, "China's Rise and Asian Tensions Send U.S. Relations into Downward Spiral," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2014.

acting more assertively and raising the risk of escalation, especially with respect to territorial disputes throughout its “near seas.” That, in turn, has raised questions about its current intentions, its future ambitions, and the appropriate U.S. role in the region.⁸

In the East China Sea, for instance, the PRC has declared an expansive air-defense identification zone, regularly probed and tested Japan’s administrative control over the Senkaku Islands, and conducted provocative maneuvers with its air and naval forces. In the South China Sea, it has embarked on an island-building campaign of unprecedented scope, constructed lengthy runways and reinforced aircraft hangers on reclaimed maritime features, and deployed weapons to some of these outposts despite its pledges to avoid militarization. Meanwhile, China has also continued to modernize the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Not only has it revealed new capabilities, such as longer-range missiles, stealthy combat aircraft, and more advanced unmanned aerial vehicles, but it has also been implementing major organizational reforms and dispatching surface and undersea naval forces farther from its shores.

How should the United States respond to these developments? Building on efforts by its predecessor, the Obama administration declared five years ago that it would rebalance U.S. foreign and defense policy by placing more emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region, a theme that it often repeated in official documents and public statements.⁹ Although some observers have faulted this effort on various grounds, from how it was announced to how it has been executed, few have disagreed with its basic thrust. Rather, most accept the need to pay more attention to the region, to avoid becoming overcommitted in other areas, to recognize China as a serious strategic competitor, and to manage the military dimension of its rise more efficiently.¹⁰

Under the broad rubric of the rebalance, the United States continues to shore up its defense posture across the Asia-Pacific. This includes basing more power projection assets on the U.S. territory of Guam, stationing naval forces in Singapore and a contingent of Marines in northern Australia, and gaining access to a handful of facilities throughout the Philippines. It has been devising new concepts for expeditionary operations in contested environments, namely, the original AirSea Battle concept and its more recent incarnation, the Joint Operational Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons. It has been improving

8 Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing’s Assertiveness,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4, Winter 2015.

9 See, for example, Department of Defense (DoD), *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2012); DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2014); and DoD, *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2015). This shift in focus predated the Obama administration and is reflected in earlier strategic documents, including the 2001 and 2006 Quadrennial Defense Reviews as well as the 2004 Global Defense Posture Review. For a discussion of the antecedents to the pivot, see Nina Silove, “The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia,” *International Security* 40, no. 4, Spring 2016.

10 For an overview and defense of the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region by one of its chief architects, see Kurt M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve Books, 2016). Other appraisals include David J. Berteau, Michael J. Green, and Zack Cooper, *Assessing the Asia-Pacific Rebalance* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014); Michael Green et al, *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016); and Van Jackson, “Red Teaming the Rebalance: The Theory and Risks of US Asia Strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 3, 2016.

the effectiveness of current-generation military platforms, principally through the use of new or modified munitions to provide additional offensive striking power. And, as part of the Pentagon's Third Offset Strategy, it is investigating a handful of technology areas that could yield major payoffs down the road, such as robotics, directed energy, autonomous operating systems, additive manufacturing, and "big data."

Alongside these steps, the PRC's neighbors have drawn more closely to the United States and to one another.¹¹ They have also begun reorienting their military forces to strengthen deterrence vis-à-vis China. Japan, for instance, has adapted its defense planning to emphasize the protection of its outlying islands to the southwest, which are the territories most at risk from the PRC, and has reinterpreted its longstanding prohibition on collective self-defense, which should enable it to support the United States in local contingencies. For its part, Taiwan is moving from a conscription-based force to an all-volunteer force, fielding new capabilities such as missile boats, and redoubling its efforts to develop or purchase modern submarines. In addition, Vietnam has been acquiring a variety of military platforms that could impose heavy costs on China in the event of a conflict offshore and improving ties with the United States in a significant diplomatic move for both sides.

Despite these efforts to counter the PRC's growing military power in the region, the outlines of U.S. defense strategy for East Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific are not as clear as they could be or should be, and are still regularly debated.¹² For instance, government documents and official pronouncements often reiterate longstanding U.S. interests in the area, such as preventing conflict and preserving freedom of navigation. They also highlight policies that are being taken in support of those interests, such as deploying certain forces and reaching new agreements with local allies. Perhaps more important than general principles and discrete activities, however, is a clear statement of Washington's global grand strategy, its regional defense strategy, and the linkages between the two—as well as the virtues of these options compared to alternatives. Without this type of explanation, maintaining an effective deterrent, assuring vulnerable allies, and sustaining commitments in the face of limited resources and obligations in other theaters will only become harder.¹³

11 One recent and notable exception has been the Philippines.

12 For a sample of these debates, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4, July/August 2016; Ashley J. Tellis, *Balancing without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014); James Steinberg and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.–China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Robert S. Ross, "US Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2, Summer 2013.

13 The principal focus of this paper is on the role of conventional military forces in supporting U.S. grand strategy objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. For assessments of how U.S. nuclear forces contribute to these objectives by deterring conflict and dissuading proliferation, see Evan Braden Montgomery, *The Future of America's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013); and Evan Braden Montgomery, *Extended Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age: Geopolitics, Proliferation, and the Future of U.S. Security Commitments* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016).

The remainder of this report proceeds in three main chapters. The first chapter reviews the core tenets of U.S. grand strategy, their continuing relevance as Washington confronts revisionist powers in multiple regions, and some of the key challenges that will make the military foundations of this strategy harder to sustain over time. The second chapter evaluates the different aspects of China's growing coercive power and argues that its investments in aerospace, information warfare, and naval capabilities should remain the focus of U.S. defense planning. Finally, the third chapter outlines several defense strategy alternatives for the United States and makes the case for adapting its existing approach—forward defense—through the better integration of land power.

CHAPTER 1

Strategy in a Changing Security Environment

Ideally, regional defense strategies should be nested within a global grand strategy—one that lays out key national security objectives, draws upon the full range of foreign policy tools to meet them, and operates within the bounds of available resources. But what type of grand strategy does the United States currently need? Or, to be more accurate, should the United States retain or reject the grand strategy of global leadership and engagement that it has followed (with some deviations) for many decades? Now is an opportune time to ask these questions.

The start of a new administration offers a rare chance for reflection, assessment, and, if necessary, strategic adjustment. Moreover, the United States currently finds itself in a difficult set of circumstances. A series of costly interventions across the broader Middle East has consumed enormous resources and raised doubts about the utility of exercising American military power. Self-imposed constraints on defense spending have made it hard to carry out operations overseas while simultaneously preparing for future challenges, some of which are no longer far over the horizon. And geopolitical and technological changes are reshaping the security environment in significant ways. Thanks to all of these developments, the extent and durability of U.S. primacy are in flux—and in doubt.¹⁴

This chapter argues that abandoning traditional strategic objectives would be a mistake. In fact, global leadership and engagement will become increasingly necessary as revisionist actors such as China position themselves to alter the status quo in critical regions. It will also

14 For alternative views on U.S. primacy, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: The Rise of China and the Fate of America’s Global Position,” *International Security* 40, no. 3, Winter 2015/2016; Christopher Layne, “This Time It’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the *Pax Americana*,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1, March 2012; Michael Beckley, “China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security* 36, no. 3, Winter 2011/2012; and Eric S. Edelman, *Understanding America’s Contested Primacy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

become increasingly difficult, however, as Washington’s attention is pulled in many different directions and some of its conventional military advantages begin to erode. Retrenchment, therefore, is an alluring but dangerous alternative, and implementing it would be a “massive experiment” and a major gamble.¹⁵ Even if the United States manages to avoid this temptation, though, it will still need to set clear priorities, especially for long-term defense planning. Those priorities should be strongly influenced by the relevance of East Asia and the rise of China.

The Evolution of U.S. Strategy

For approximately 70 years, the grand strategy of the United States has been defined by a set of core objectives: preventing hostile actors from dominating key regions along the rimland of Eurasia; protecting allies that have taken shelter under the U.S. security umbrella; and providing public goods that underpin a liberal economic order, including the freedom to transit international waters and airspace without interference. This approach to America’s international role was built on enduring political and economic foundations, including a bipartisan consensus on the dangers of isolationism as well as a shared belief that open markets and free trade help to avoid conflict among nations. It also has deep geopolitical roots.¹⁶

During the 1940s, Nicholas Spykman famously observed that the United States was a continental-sized nation with enormous natural resources, no serious threats along its borders, and unfettered access to the world’s two largest oceans. But its advantageous position was not absolute. Rather, it depended on a balance of power abroad. If a single nation (or coalition of nations) could achieve primacy across Eurasia, it would gain control over the manpower, natural resources, industrial capacity, and strategic geography necessary to alter the global distribution of power—isolating the United States from key economic and security partners, restricting its access to the international commons, and perhaps even putting its territory at risk of attack. Consequently, he argued, in a world that was populated by revisionist powers and experiencing rapid technological change, “There is no safe defensive position on this side of the oceans.”¹⁷

This cautionary note quickly became a guiding principle of U.S. policy and remained so in the decades that followed. The decision to intervene against Germany and Japan during World War II—first with material support to frontline allies and later with expeditionary military

15 Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3, Winter 2012/2013, p. 10. For a comprehensive overview of great power retrenchment, see Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “Graceful Decline: The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security* 35, no. 4, Spring 2011.

16 Key works on U.S. strategy include John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

17 Nicholas J. Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008 [1942]), p. 457.

forces in multiple theaters—was driven by fears that these two aggressors would divide Eurasia between them, leaving the United States alone in the Western Hemisphere and on the defensive. Likewise, the choice to forgo episodic involvement overseas during the Cold War in favor of a more active and persistent role in maintaining stability abroad stemmed from concerns that the Soviet Union would extend its reach far beyond the Eurasian heartland, dominate local counterweights along its periphery, and gain control over enormous resources as well as new outlets to the sea.¹⁸

The lessons of the Second World War and the demands of the Cold War also left an enormous mark on the military aspects of U.S. strategy, which had previously relied on delayed mobilization and armed intervention abroad only after frontline nations had fallen to prevent dangerous concentrations of economic and military power.¹⁹ Instead, policymakers began to emphasize continuous global presence, forward defense, and nuclear deterrence.²⁰ For instance, Washington shaped and sized its military to counter acts of aggression when and where they occurred, not only to prevent overseas threats from reaching the homeland but also to discourage adversaries from challenging the status quo. It forged alliances and partnerships with nations across the rimland of Eurasia, which allowed the United States to share the burdens of preserving stability, station forces abroad as a tangible symbol of U.S. security commitments, and secure the access that it required for defense-in-depth and power projection. Lastly, it fielded a large and diverse nuclear arsenal to support direct and extended deterrence, particularly against adversaries that enjoyed numerical advantages in manpower and materiel.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States was left with a force structure, global posture, and alliance network that were a legacy of its struggle to contain a peer competitor. Although this bestowed “command of the commons,” which served U.S. interests as well as those of the international community, it also led to changes in the chief aims and geographic scope of U.S. strategy.²¹ Given the extent of its military dominance and the absence of any

18 An emphasis on preserving a balance of power abroad was also evident during World War I, when the United States intervened in Europe to prevent a German victory that would leave Berlin in a preponderant position on the continent. Yet geopolitical concerns diminished soon afterward and remained in the background for the next two decades. As Eliot Cohen notes, intervention was subsequently considered by most Americans to be “a grievous exception to a long-standing policy of noninvolvement in European affairs,” one they did not wish to repeat until circumstances once again made military involvement necessary. Eliot A. Cohen, “The Strategy of Innocence? The United States, 1920–1945,” in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 429.

19 Melvyn P. Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War,” *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 2, April 1984.

20 See, for example, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, *U.S. Global Defense Posture, 1783–2011* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), especially chapter 9; and Evan Braden Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection,” *International Security* 38, no. 4, Spring 2014, especially pp. 126–129.

21 Barry R. Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* 28, no. 1, Summer 2003. On the extent of U.S. advantages during the post–Cold War era, see William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, no. 1, Summer 1999; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “American Primacy in Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 4, July/August 2002.

existing or prospective major power rival, concern over the emergence of hostile hegemony seemed anachronistic, whereas threats from rogue nations and terrorist groups became the most pressing concerns for policymakers in Washington. Moreover, Europe was largely free of major power rivalry due to the expansion of NATO and the weakness of Russia, while most nations in East Asia were more preoccupied with economic growth than with military competition. That enabled the United States to reduce the size of its forces, shrink its global military footprint, and concentrate much of its attention on the broader Middle East, where the most serious threats to its security seemed to be located.

The Enduring Relevance of U.S. Strategy

The apparent obsolescence of traditional geopolitical threats also provided a renewed impetus for longstanding criticisms of U.S. grand strategy, especially as the costs of war in Iraq and Afghanistan mounted in the mid-2000s. For instance, a number of prominent commentators have called for Washington to scale back its security commitments and return to the pre-World War II approach of intervening abroad only when other nations fail to preserve stability on their own. Yet there still appears to be relatively little support among most officials for a grand strategy of “offshore balancing” because the risks of retrenchment—including the possibility of emboldening hostile actors, triggering arms races among former allies, and allowing collective action problems to go unresolved—have not gone away.²² In fact, those risks are becoming more pronounced as the stark differences between the Cold War and post-Cold War periods now begin to disappear.

Although some scholars have already declared that the era of geopolitics has come to a close, the United States now faces revisionist powers in each of the three regions that have long been deemed critical by policymakers and analysts alike.²³ For example, Russia’s recent behavior suggests that its 2008 military campaign against the Republic of Georgia was not an aberration but rather an initial effort to overturn the prevailing order in Europe. By seizing Crimea, supporting rebel forces in eastern Ukraine, and intimidating its neighbors to the west, Moscow has made it clear that it does not accept the status quo. Iran, meanwhile, continues to support

22 Proponents of offshore balancing generally assume that the United States enjoys a high level of security thanks to its geographic position and large nuclear arsenal; that an activist foreign policy reduces that security by expending scarce resources and provoking balancing behavior; and that alliance commitments encourage free-riding on the part of wealthy partners. See especially John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). For a debate over the pros and cons of this strategy, see Barry Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” and Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement,” both published in *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 2, January/February 2012. A recent and convincing critique of offshore balancing is Hal Brands, “Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2, Summer 2015.

23 On the apparent decline of geopolitics, see Christopher Fettweis, “Revisiting Mackinder and Angell: The Obsolescence of Great Power Geopolitics,” *Comparative Strategy* 22, no. 2, 2003; and Steven Van Evera, “A Farewell to Geopolitics,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *To Lead the World: American Strategy after the Bush Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

extremist groups throughout the Middle East and take steps to enhance its military strength. Moreover, so long as local nations are wracked by internal instability, the external barriers to Iranian aggression will remain limited. Finally, as noted above, China's economic growth and military buildup have begun to alter the balance of power in East Asia. Thus the future of that region is now in question as well.

In sum, "geopolitical rivalries have stormed back to center stage."²⁴ Admittedly, these challenges differ from those that Washington has confronted in the past. For instance, it seems implausible that any single revisionist power will be able to dominate the rimland on its own. Even during the height of the Cold War, the prospect that the Soviet Union could successfully fight a multi-theater war and secure control over Europe, Asia, and the Middle East was extremely low given the capabilities of the United States and its allies, as well as the limitations of Moscow's armed forces. Today, however, resistance groups can be equipped with extremely sophisticated weapons (making overt aggrandizement against weaker targets a risky proposition), while many national economies are based more on information technology than industrial capacity (making successful expansion less profitable than it once was). Similarly, it is unlikely that a coalition of nations will be able to divide the rimland between them without coming to blows. During the Second World War, Germany and Japan were partners that sought to expand in different directions and were separated by a large geographic buffer. Looking forward, the two chief candidates to dominate Eurasia—China and Russia—are contiguous powers that might cooperate in some areas but are still suspicious of one another due to a combination of historical grievances and contemporary disputes.

Despite these differences, revisionist powers are taking steps to carve out spheres of influence around their peripheries, restrict outside access to economically vital areas, weaken opposing alliances, and undermine the international order that the United States worked to create and continues to sustain. As a result, Washington's well-established strategic objectives are still relevant today. Achieving those objectives is almost certain to become more problematic, however, and not simply because of resource constraints. Although the United States might be reluctant to pull back from its overseas commitments, and for good reason, successfully implementing a grand strategy of global leadership and engagement will require overcoming a major hurdle: the military strategy of forward defense that underpins it is becoming much harder to implement.

The Emerging Challenges to U.S. Strategy

What are the principal trends that are increasing the threat to forward-operating forces and therefore raising doubts about the broader grand strategy that they underpin? Although there are factors that could make the deterrence of aggression and defense of allies increasingly

24 Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3, May/June 2014, p. 69. See also Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

problematic, two in particular stand out because, unlike domestic political choices such as the limitations on defense spending mandated by the Budget Control Act of 2011, they are not simply the product of decisions in Washington and thus seem far more likely to endure irrespective of U.S. domestic political calculations.

First, with the emergence (or reemergence) of several large, capable, ambitious, and mutually supportive revisionist powers across the Eurasian rimland, not to mention the persistence of lower-level threats such as violent extremist groups, the United States faces a *three-theater problem* that it has rarely confronted in the past. Since adopting a grand strategy of global leadership and engagement after the Second World War, Washington has been able to concentrate most of its attention, effort, and resources on just two major regions, at least in regards to defense policy. That alone was a considerable task. Yet the geographic scope of new security challenges makes the current situation even more complex. As one observer notes, “Areas that have long been a focal point for defense planning—Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia—are all facing profound and unsettling change, and the United States may no longer have the luxury of choosing among regions.”²⁵

Although the Cold War was a global competition, the primary focus of U.S. policymakers was on events in Europe and to a lesser extent East Asia, where the risks of Soviet expansion were most serious (and, in the latter case, where threats from China and North Korea also loomed large at various points). By contrast, the logistical challenges of a Soviet push into the broader Middle East were much more daunting, while Britain’s traditional role as the key external power in the area allowed the United States to engage in a significant degree of burden-sharing. Even after London opted to withdraw from its outposts east of Suez, which lowered the barriers to Soviet expansion, Washington could still turn to Iran under the Shah as its local deputy. That changed in late 1979, however, after the Iranian revolution deprived the United States of a key partner and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan made a move on the region seem much more plausible. With the Middle East suddenly a priority, the United States spent the next decade managing threats across each of the world’s three geostrategically critical regions. After the Cold War came to an end, however, Washington once again narrowed its focus—this time concentrating on the Middle East and East Asia, home to rogue nations such as Iraq and North Korea that were the chief threats to the United States and the main drivers of U.S. defense planning.²⁶

Today, the United States is deeply engaged in all three regions, a situation that is unlikely to change given the presence of revisionist powers in each one. Although their willingness and ability to overturn the status quo varies, the presence of multiple challengers means that

25 Andrew R. Hoehn, “The New Global Juggling Act,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 7, 2014. See also William J. Perry and John P. Abizaid, Co-Chairs, *Ensuring a Strong U.S. Defense for the Future: The National Defense Panel Review of the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014), especially chapter 3.

26 This focus was codified in the 1993 Bottom Up Review and the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review, which established a two-war planning construct that used conflicts against a pair of regional powers as the benchmark for determining the size and shape of U.S. forces.

Washington may not be able to devote most of its attention to a single corner of the globe or optimize its armed forces for one type of opponent, unless it is willing to accept greater risk in other geographic areas or against other competitors, respectively.

Second, trends in technological diffusion, emulation, and innovation have also created a *power projection problem* for the United States in multiple regions. Throughout the post–Cold War era, Washington has enjoyed an enormous conventional military advantage over any potential adversary. But this primacy is now being challenged. With its near-monopoly on precision-strike weapons eroding, potential rivals are much more capable of holding at risk U.S. military assets. That, in turn, could make it far more difficult for the United States to halt aggression and reinforce allies.

Since 2001, the United States has fought a pair of extremely costly wars against opponents that were inferior to it in nearly every respect, except for their knowledge of the local terrain and population, as well as their determination to achieve success through cost-imposition and stalemate. Yet the challenges that Washington has faced during these protracted ground combat operations should not obscure the fact that its ability to project power across the globe has gone virtually unchallenged for more than two decades. Beginning with the buildup of American military units in Saudi Arabia following Saddam Hussein’s annexation of Kuwait in 1990 and continuing up to the present day, the United States has repeatedly been able to mobilize over an extended period of time; deploy its forces over lengthy air and sea lines of communication; gain access to theater ports, airfields, and staging areas that have remained immune from serious attacks; and achieve air superiority using short-range platforms based close to an area of operations.²⁷

These favorable conditions have had a major impact on U.S. force structure and contingency planning since the end of the Cold War.²⁸ Yet there is a growing recognition in many quarters that they have also created significant vulnerabilities, which an attentive, motivated, and well-resourced adversary could exploit. Moreover, changes in technology are making that prospect more likely.

Improvements in data processing, wide-area sensors, terminal guidance, and communications links have combined to make conventional weapons much more lethal over progressively greater ranges—and against both fixed and mobile targets. As an early adopter of these technologies, the United States established a commanding lead in the precision-strike regime and used this position to reap considerable gains in military effectiveness and efficiency. This relative advantage has eroded, however, as technology has diffused and other actors have sought

27 On the main characteristics of U.S. power projection in the post–Cold War era, see especially Alan J. Vick, *Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters: Historical Lessons and Future Challenges* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), chapter 3; and Jan van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

28 Mark Gunzinger, *Shaping America’s Future Military: Toward a New Force Planning Construct* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013).

to emulate the United States in some respects and innovate in others.²⁹ Potential adversaries are now gaining the ability to impose significant costs on U.S. forces by putting up a much more serious fight than they could in the past—and to do so without resorting to irregular warfare or nuclear escalation. Thus the relatively brief era of uncontested force projection is drawing to a close. This is true not only in Europe, where Russia is deploying conventionally armed ballistic missiles that can target its neighbors and extending an air defense umbrella over the territory of NATO members, but also in the Middle East, where Iran continues to field anti-ship missiles that could threaten slow-moving vessels inside the narrow waters of the Persian Gulf and is working to improve the effectiveness of its surface-to-surface ballistic missile inventory.³⁰ And, as described in the following chapter, it is especially the case in East Asia, where China has taken the lead in exploiting the precision-strike regime to challenge U.S. power projection.

Conclusion

The stark geopolitical and technological changes that are reshaping the security environment have sparked heated debates over the durability of U.S. primacy and the future of U.S. strategy. They have also convinced senior officials in Washington that a new era of great-power competition is now at hand.³¹ Importantly, the rise of well-armed revisionist powers will have crosscutting effects. On the one hand, it is making the core objectives of U.S. grand strategy more relevant than they have been in decades. On the other hand, the military elements of that grand strategy will be more difficult to sustain in a world characterized by several major challengers that are each growing far more capable. Under these conditions, Washington will need to establish and maintain clear priorities for defense planning. Although Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia will all remain relevant, and although events in one region could have serious ramifications elsewhere, it may not be possible to rank each area equally. Instead, there are strong reasons to place the most emphasis on East Asia—a conclusion that even most proponents of retrenchment would agree with.³² Not only is it becoming the center of the global economy, but it is also home to the only emerging great power that the United States now faces. Of course, Washington does have local partners that could help

29 Thomas G. Mahnken, “Weapons: The Growth & Spread of the Precision-Strike Regime,” *Daedalus* 140, no. 3, Summer 2011; Barry Watts, *The Maturing Revolution in Military Affairs* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011); and Barry Watts, *The Evolution of Precision Strike* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013).

30 “Putin’s New Model Army,” *The Economist*, May 24, 2014; Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “What the US, NATO Must Do to Counter Russia: Breedlove, Gorenc, & Odierno,” *Breaking Defense*, September 22, 2014; Matthew Bodner, “NATO Deputy SecGen: Russia’s Anti-Access/Area-Denial Buildup is Biggest Worry,” *Defense News*, February 13, 2016; Michael Eisenstadt, “Missiles and the Nuclear Negotiations with Iran,” *Policywatch 2450*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 6, 2015; and DoD, “Executive Summary,” in *Fiscal Year 2015 Annual Report on Military Power of Iran* (Washington, DC: DoD, January 2016).

31 Andrew Clevenger, “Work: Future Includes Competition between US, Great Powers,” *Defense News*, November 23, 2015; and Geoff Dyer, “US Military: Robot Wars,” *Financial Times*, February 7, 2016.

32 See, for example, Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing.”

to counterbalance the PRC should it become more aggressive and attempt to dominate the region. Yet none of China's neighbors are strong enough to preserve stability on their own, and tensions among them make serious collaboration a remote possibility absent U.S. pressure. Finally, and most important of all, China's military modernization puts it at the forefront of security challenges to the United States.

CHAPTER 2

Putting China's Military Rise in Perspective

For most of its history, China has been a continental nation with second-tier armed forces. Not only was China traditionally concerned about nearby land power rivals such as the Soviet Union than distant maritime competitors such as the United States, but it also had to rely on its strategic depth and large manpower reserves to compensate for its very limited technological base. In recent decades, however, its geopolitical orientation has started to shift while its military strength has grown. As one overview explains, “improved security along China’s land periphery, along with other factors such as infrastructure development and the coastal concentration of economic assets, has turned Beijing’s defense focus toward the seas, skies, heavens, and cyberspace.”³³ At the same time, the PRC has been implementing major changes in its military doctrine, warfighting concepts, and force structure, many of which have been influenced by repeated demonstrations of U.S. precision-strike capabilities, beginning with the first Gulf War in 1991.³⁴

These developments have raised a host of questions for the United States, which is committed to protecting many of China’s neighbors and has a deep interest in preventing the use of conflict or coercion to alter the status quo in its neighborhood. For instance, what aspects of China’s military rise are most worrisome and how serious are these potential threats likely

33 Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power*, p. 48. On China’s aspirations to become a maritime-oriented power despite its continental legacy, see Michael McDevitt, *Becoming a Great “Maritime Power”: A Chinese Dream* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2016).

34 Overviews of China’s military modernization include Michael D. Swaine et al., *China’s Military and the U.S.—Japan Alliance in 2030: A Strategic Net Assessment* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013); Anthony H. Cordesman et al., *China’s Military Modernization and Force Development: Chinese and Outside Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2014); Roger Cliff, *China’s Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.—China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).

to become? Although the answers to these questions will have a significant influence on U.S. strategy and defense planning, they are not as straightforward as they might seem. Thanks to its continuing economic growth and geopolitical ambitions, Beijing has enhanced the survivability and reach of its nuclear forces, increased the quality of its ground forces, and deployed naval forces outside its home region with more regularity. It has also invested in paramilitary capabilities such as a large coast guard fleet, which it can use to challenge the status quo while reducing the likelihood of escalation, and has built new island outposts in the South China Sea, which are already changing the “facts on the water.”³⁵

To address these questions, this chapter reviews the various dimensions of China’s growing coercive power and tries to place them in a broader strategic context. As argued below, meeting the challenges posed by the PRC’s conventional military capabilities, and in particular its counter-intervention capabilities, should be the chief focus of the United States. Not only do these capabilities represent the most significant potential threat to the United States over the long run, but they also enable or underpin other possible risks that Washington could face in the region.

The Different Dimensions of China’s Coercive Power

As the military aspects of Sino–U.S. relations have received more careful attention, one aspect in particular continues to stand out: Washington’s ability to project power into the Western Pacific versus Beijing’s ability to deny or restrict access to the area. Put another way, the United States must deploy, operate, and sustain its forces over considerable distances if it wants to deter aggression, safeguard allies, and uphold freedom of the commons. China, therefore, must impede the entry of those forces into its neighborhood and/or limit their effectiveness once they arrive if it hopes to secure its maritime flank, control disputed territory inside the first island chain, gain leverage over its neighbors, and reestablish its prior status as the dominant actor in the region.

To date, China has been driving and shaping this competition between power projection and what is often referred to as anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD).³⁶ That is not surprising given its status as a weaker but rising power, one that enjoys a second-mover advantage over a stronger power that is not only experiencing a degree of relative decline, but that also has a well-known and carefully studied military playbook. Specifically, China now possesses a variety of

35 David E. Sanger and Rick Gladstone, “Piling Sand in a Disputed Sea, China Literally Gains Ground,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2015.

36 In general, anti-access refers to inhibiting the deployment of opposing forces into a theater of operations, whereas area denial refers to countering forces that are already operating within a theater. As a number of analysts have recently pointed out, Chinese documents do not use the term A2/AD, which has its origins in the United States. Rather, they use the term counter-intervention, which has a similar connotation. See Christensen, *The China Challenge*, p. 65; M. Taylor Fravel and Christopher P. Twomey, “Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-Intervention,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4, Winter 2015; and Timothy Heath and Andrew S. Erickson, “Is China Pursuing Counter-Intervention?” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 3, Fall 2015.

land-attack, sea-denial, anti-air, and counter-C4ISR capabilities, including highly accurate ballistic and cruise missiles, an increasingly modern air force, and sophisticated anti-satellite, cyber attack, and electronic warfare capabilities. These tools could be used to directly threaten the main pillars of contemporary U.S. air and maritime power projection: large theater bases, high-signature combat and combat support assets, and complex information networks.³⁷

Although other aspects of China's rise have started to receive attention, especially during the past several years, its conventional forces in general and its A2/AD capabilities in particular should continue to take precedence when it comes to long-term U.S. defense strategy and planning, for three main reasons.

First, although Beijing is currently upgrading its nuclear forces—deploying new ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), fielding new road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), and putting multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV) on some of its older, silo-based ICBMs—the United States still has a large quantitative and qualitative advantage over China in the nuclear domain. That advantage is also likely to persist so long as Washington updates its aging arsenal and forgoes major nuclear reductions that could tempt the PRC to shrink this gap further.³⁸ Moreover, as the familiar “stability-instability paradox” indicates, any improvements in Chinese nuclear capabilities that guarantee Beijing can absorb a large-scale attack and launch a massive reprisal could actually heighten the risk of a non-nuclear clash. Simply put, the enormous costs of a nuclear exchange might make this outcome less likely and thus reduce one of the main barriers to conventional war, namely the fear of uncontrolled escalation.³⁹

Second, despite China's investments in more traditional tools of power projection, such as aircraft carriers, large surface combatants, and amphibious assault ships, it is unlikely to build up sufficient capacity (or acquire the necessary overseas basing and support infrastructure) to challenge U.S. military dominance outside of East Asia, at least not for quite some time.⁴⁰

37 Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific.”

38 According to public estimates, China has a relatively small number of nuclear warheads that can be delivered by ballistic missiles and bombers. Despite improvements to its arsenal, it still appears wedded to a strategy of assured retaliation, which entails absorbing a first strike and launching an attack in response, and does not appear likely to engage in a large-scale buildup. See Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2016,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72, no. 4, June 2016; and Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, “Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and U.S.–China Strategic Stability,” *International Security* 40, no. 2, Fall 2015.

39 On the stability-instability paradox, see Glenn Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury, ed., *Balance of Power* (San Francisco, CA: Chandler Publishing, 1965); and Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

40 Nevertheless, China is becoming much more interested in global power projection for a variety of economic, diplomatic, and strategic reasons. For discussions, see Aaron Friedberg, “Going Out”: *China's Pursuit of Natural Resources and Implications for the PRC's Grand Strategy*, NBR Analysis (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Bureau of Asian Research, September 2006); and Kristen Gunness and Oriana Skylar Mastro, “A Global People's Liberation Army: Possibilities, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *Asia Policy* 22, July 2016.

Even within East Asia, the utility of these high-signature platforms will be limited given their inherent vulnerability, which China's own military modernization has highlighted.⁴¹ In fact, to the extent that traditional power projection capabilities could pose a threat to the United States and its allies in the region, it would be alongside and in coordination with PRC A2/AD systems. For instance, if China could inhibit the United States from patrolling and defending the air and maritime commons along its periphery, or if it could hinder Washington from intervening in local conflicts with neighbors, then it might also be able to operate power projection capabilities in a much more permissive environment. That, in turn, could enable Beijing to more easily control vital sea-lanes or disputed territory. In other words, A2/AD systems could be the shield that keeps the United States at bay, while power projection capabilities could be the sword that gives China leverage over other regional actors inside its defense perimeter.⁴² But power projection capabilities that are not complemented by A2/AD systems should only represent a modest risk.

Third, concerns about "gray zone situations" and "creeping expansion" are entirely warranted and will almost certainly be a focal point of U.S. policy as Washington looks to keep the status quo intact and assure nervous allies. Although these challenges are more ambiguous than those described above, they are arguably more immediate. For instance, China's paramilitary forces have become one of the most visible tools of its revisionist behavior, especially in the East China Sea, where the PRC has regularly dispatched coast guard vessels to the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands in order to establish a continuous presence in the area and challenge Japan's administrative control over it.⁴³ And in the South China Sea, China's island-building campaign has already altered the strategic geography of the region and helped Beijing to cement its claims to disputed territory. Nevertheless, both of these challenges need to be placed in a broader perspective.

The day-to-day management of paramilitary forces must be a job for local nations, who are present on the scene and can devote the entirety of their maritime law enforcement assets to

41 This is one reason that many analysts have recommended that China's neighbors begin to field their own A2/AD systems, such as land-based sea-denial and anti-air capabilities. In fact, nations such as Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam are already taking steps in this direction. See, for example, Toshi Yoshihara, "Japan's Competitive Strategies at Sea: A Preliminary Assessment," and James P. Thomas and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Developing a Strategy for a Long-Term Sino-American Competition," both in Thomas G. Mahnken, *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

42 There is, of course, overlap between these two sets of capabilities. For instance, surface naval forces equipped with long-range air defense systems and nuclear-powered submarines with considerable endurance could each play a power projection role as well as an A2/AD role.

43 For discussions of China's actions in the East China Sea and the broader implications for regional stability, see Tetsuo Kotani, *The Senkaku Islands and the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Future Implications for the Asia-Pacific* (Washington, DC: Project 2049 Institute, March 14, 2013); International Crisis Group, "Dangerous Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks," *Asia Report*, no. 245, April 8, 2013; and International Crisis Group, "Old Scores and New Grudges: Evolving Sino-Japanese Tensions," *Asia Report*, no. 258, July 24, 2014.

dealing with these provocations if necessary.⁴⁴ Perhaps even more important, the effectiveness of paramilitary threats will be shaped in no small part by the conventional military power backstopping them.⁴⁵ Notably, the Chinese coast guard is often employed with surface naval assets in an overwatch position. When it comes to deterrence and managing vertical escalation, therefore, the focus of the United States should be applying its comparative advantages to undercut paramilitary threats from the “top down,” while allies take the lead in dealing with them from the “bottom up.” In addition, although China’s recent efforts to reclaim maritime features and reinforce newly built islands represent a version of “salami tactics” that is difficult to deter in the near term, it is also a way of enhancing its conventional military power over the long run.⁴⁶ Although artificial islands might not be unsinkable aircraft carriers, they will be able to host a variety of military capabilities and could, therefore, alter the strategic calculus of the United States during a crisis—especially if they enable the PRC to extend and reinforce its A2/AD umbrella.⁴⁷

The remainder of this chapter, therefore, provides an overview of China’s A2/AD capabilities, including its land-based precision-strike forces, its information warfare systems, and its modern naval platforms. It then describes how they have enabled Beijing to narrow or reverse the military power gap with its neighbors and why they could make forward defense far more difficult.

China’s Land-Based Missile and Air Forces

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the PLA’s modernization—one that poses unique operational dilemmas for the United States and its allies—has been its ongoing pursuit of offensive aerospace capabilities. With the development of a large number of land-based missiles, a growing fleet of modern combat aircraft, an expanding surveillance architecture, and improved training, China appears to be developing the ability to conduct a coordinated strike campaign against military targets within and perhaps even beyond the first island chain that

44 This is not to suggest that local nations will have an easy time managing paramilitary threats. Given China’s enormous economic resources and massive shipbuilding industry, which have enabled it to field a growing fleet of very large coast guard cutters, neighbors could easily be outmatched in the gray zone. That, in turn, will put a premium on increasing their own paramilitary capacity, accepting more risk by employing military assets to manage paramilitary threats, devising novel methods to counter ambiguous provocations, or some combination of these three options.

45 Patrick M. Cronin, Mira Rapp-Hooper, and Harry Krejsa, *Dynamic Balance: An Alliance Requirements Roadmap for the Asia-Pacific Region* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2016), p. 6.

46 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 66.

47 On the potential military utility of these outposts, see Elbridge Colby and Evan Braden Montgomery, “Changing Tides in the South China Sea,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2015; and Thomas Shugart, “China’s Artificial Islands Are Bigger (And a Bigger Deal) Than You Think,” *War on the Rocks*, September 21, 2016.

rings the East and South China Seas, including fixed targets such as theater airbases and mobile targets such as aircraft carriers.⁴⁸

The PLA's newly rechristened Rocket Force (previously known as the Second Artillery Corps) already has a diverse inventory of ground-launched, conventionally armed, and increasingly accurate missiles at its disposal, including surface-to-surface short- and medium-range ballistic missiles (SRBM and MRBM), medium-range anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), and medium-range land-attack cruise missiles (LACM). Although the bulk of China's missile inventory is made up of SRBMs aimed at nearby Taiwan, the Rocket Force is extending its reach in several ways: by fielding newer SRBMs with longer ranges; adding more MRBMs to its arsenal; and developing intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) for conventional strikes against targets as far away as the U.S. territory of Guam, which could remove a possible U.S. sanctuary in the second island chain.⁴⁹

China's emphasis on missile forces dates back to the late 1980s and stems in large part from the limitations of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), which was once comprised mainly of outdated airframes and therefore was unable to conduct independent strike operations. Yet land-based offensive missiles also have several inherent advantages over alternative instruments of force projection. For instance, mobile missile systems are often hard to detect and interdict. Well-trained operators can deploy them to hide sites, maneuver them to pre-surveyed firing positions, and start to relocate them within minutes of launching their weapons.⁵⁰ In addition, ballistic missiles are difficult to defend against given their high velocities, especially if warheads can maneuver or be equipped with penetration aids. Alternatively, cruise missiles are often slow but stealthy and can follow complex flight paths that make air defense difficult. Finally, offensive missiles can allow attackers to achieve favorable cost-exchange ratios because they are much less expensive than most potential targets as well as existing countermeasures.

Meanwhile, the PLA has not neglected its air forces, especially over the past decade. Instead, China has been retiring outdated platforms, upgrading older aircraft, and expanding its

48 It is also possible that China could use its missile and air forces against civilian targets, including fixed targets such as economic infrastructure and mobile targets such as commercial ships. For an argument that the PRC could threaten the former, see Evan Braden Montgomery, "Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4, August 2013. For an argument that the PRC would concentrate its attacks on the latter, see Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1, Summer 2016.

49 National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC), *Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat* (Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH: NASIC Public Affairs Office, 2013); and Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, 2016). On the capabilities of the PLA's Second Artillery Corps, see also Michael S. Chase and Andrew S. Erickson, "The Conventional Missile Capabilities of China's Secondary Artillery Force: Cornerstone of Deterrence and Warfighting," *Asian Security* 8, no. 2, 2012; and Ron Christman, "China's Second Artillery Force: Capabilities and Missions for the Near Seas," in Peter Dutton, Andrew S. Erickson, and Ryan Martinson, eds., *China's Near Seas Combat Capabilities* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 2014).

50 Alan J. Vick, *Aerospace Operations against Elusive Ground Targets* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

inventory of modern, fourth-generation fighters—an inventory that includes variants of Russia’s Su-27 and Su-30 (and soon the Su-35 as well), a domestically produced copy of the Su-27 designated J-11, and the indigenously developed J-10. According to the Pentagon, the PLAAF not only has some 600 fourth-generation aircraft in service and two fifth-generation platforms in development, but it is also “rapidly closing the gap with Western air forces across a broad spectrum of capabilities from aircraft command and control (C2) to jammers, electronic warfare (EW), and datalinks.”⁵¹

How might these capabilities be employed? PLA strategists have considered using missile and air forces in a variety of regional contingencies. Perhaps the most significant concern for the United States, however, is the prospect of a so-called “joint anti-air raid campaign,” which would aim to degrade U.S. combat power in theater and prevent Washington from intervening effectively on behalf of its allies.⁵² In this scenario, ballistic and cruise missiles might be employed for destruction of enemy air defense and offensive counter-air operations at the outset of a conflict. Specifically, coordinated missile attacks have the potential to disable or destroy C2 centers and early warning systems, cut or crater runways to strand aircraft on the ground, and damage fragile platforms that are parked in open areas or stored in unhardened shelters. Subsequent attacks by combat aircraft armed with precision-guided munitions could keep runways out of service, damage other critical infrastructure such as fuel and munitions storage facilities, and conduct air-to-air engagements against operational enemy fighters. Depending on the outcome of this type of campaign, the PLAAF might be able to exploit a more permissive air environment and hold at risk other military targets of interest—and perhaps civilian targets as well. Separately, ASBMs (perhaps along with air-, sea-, and submarine-launched anti-ship cruise missiles) might be used to target U.S. carrier strike groups at sea in an effort to erode U.S. combat power further.

Of course, a coordinated air and missile campaign would test the limits of the PLA, especially given its negligible combat history and limited experience with joint operations. Nevertheless, the Rocket Force and PLAAF are working to become more adept in this area, at least when it comes to launching pre-planned attacks.⁵³ The challenges they face are also mitigated in two respects. First, U.S. combat aircraft are concentrated in a handful of air and sea bases,

51 OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2016*, p. 30. On the evolving capabilities of the PLAAF, see Wayne A. Ulman, “China’s Military Aviation Forces,” in Andrew S. Erickson and Lyle J. Goldstein, eds., *Chinese Aerospace Power: Evolving Maritime Roles* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011); and David Shlapak, “Chinese Air Superiority in the Near Seas,” in Dutton, Erickson, and Martinson, *China’s Near Seas Combat Capability*.

52 On PLA aerospace employment concepts, see David A. Shlapak et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009); as well as Mark A. Stokes, “China’s Quest for Joint Aerospace Power: Concepts and Future Aspirations,” and Roger Cliff, “The Development of the PLAAF’s Doctrine,” both in Richard P. Hallion, Roger Cliff, and Phillip C. Saunders, eds., *The Chinese Air Force: Evolving Concepts, Roles, and Capabilities* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2012).

53 Lee Fuell, Technical Director for Force Modernization & Employment, National Air & Space Intelligence Center, “Broad Trends in Chinese Air Force and Missile Modernization,” Testimony before the U.S.–China Economic & Security Review Commission, January 30, 2014, p. 10.

meaning there are relatively few targets for the PLA to focus on. Second, the United States currently depends on active defenses such as kinetic missile interceptors to protect these targets. Not only are these munitions limited in number and expensive to procure, but it is also typically necessary to fire multiple rounds against each incoming missile to ensure a high probability of kill. Consequently, Washington and Tokyo run the risk of exhausting their defensive magazines in the face of saturation attacks or during a protracted conflict.

China's aerospace capabilities do have important limitations, however. For instance, although the PLA's arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles seems quite large at first glance, these are expendable assets that can deliver a relatively small amount of ordnance, at least in comparison to aircraft that can generate high sortie rates under favorable conditions. If the set of targets that China must hold at risk is high and the number of times these targets must be serviced is large, then the PLA could deplete its missile inventory before it achieves its strategic objectives. This is particularly true if key targets are located beyond the maximum range of China's numerous SRBMs (for example, on the main islands of the Japanese archipelago rather than in the Ryukyus that lie closer to China's shores). By contrast, the PLAAF has the capacity to deliver a much greater volume of firepower. As one study notes, however, there is little indication that it has developed the ability to generate large numbers of sorties, to sustain high-tempo flight operations over an extended period of time, or to conduct operations from bases that are under attack.⁵⁴ In addition, the PLAAF has a negligible aerial refueling capability, which limits its ability to conduct and sustain operations at range, although it is taking modest steps to rectify this gap.

China's Information Warfare Capabilities

An important trend in the character of modern conflict—one that is closely intertwined with the proliferation of conventional precision-strike systems such as land-based offensive missiles and advanced combat aircraft—is the movement of military competitions into space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum to a greater extent than ever before. This presents a sharp dilemma for the United States. Although it has been at the forefront of this trend in recent decades, its reliance on complex information networks has also created potential vulnerabilities that other nations could exploit.

Specifically, the United States depends on the ability to collect, store, and transmit vast amounts of data to mobilize, deploy, operate, and sustain its military. For instance, it relies on satellites for long-haul communications, precision navigation and timing, surveillance and reconnaissance, and early warning, among other functions. Internet Protocol-based networks enable personnel across the globe to access vast repositories of information and share files in near-real time. Meanwhile, radiofrequency transmissions link together forces in the field, enhancing their situational awareness and multiplying their effectiveness. Yet satellites

54 Shlapak, "China's Air Superiority in the Near Seas," p. 66.

travel in predictable orbits that can be tracked and targeted from the ground, have a limited ability to maneuver away from possible threats, and often use signals that are not protected against interception or disruption. Computer networks can be exploited or corrupted by a variety of outsider and insider threats. Finally, radiofrequency transmissions can be jammed and transmitters themselves can be entry points for the wireless insertion of malicious software code. Perhaps not surprisingly, Chinese strategists—including many who believe that the importance of information is a defining feature of contemporary warfare much like the role of mechanization in twentieth-century combat—view information networks as a critical weakness of stronger opponents.⁵⁵ From this perspective, therefore, achieving information dominance is a key step in any conflict.

To take advantage of these information-based vulnerabilities, the PLA has been developing and fielding a variety of new capabilities.⁵⁶ For example, in 2007 it successfully tested a direct-ascent, kinetic kill anti-satellite weapon (ASAT) based on an MRBM by destroying a spacecraft in low-earth orbit. It has subsequently conducted ballistic missile defense tests demonstrating the same technology—and possibly the capability to attack satellites at higher orbits as well. The PLA is also known to have other ASAT programs in development, such as jammers to disrupt space-based signals, micro-satellites that could shadow and then attack spacecraft, and directed-energy systems that could dazzle, blind, or potentially destroy orbital systems.⁵⁷ China's interest in cyber warfare is also well known. Open sources indicate that the PLA has used computer network exploitation and attack capabilities to penetrate U.S. government and defense industry targets (as well as targets in other countries), exfiltrating sensitive data and interrupting day-to-day operations.⁵⁸ Finally, the PLA believes that EW is one of the best ways to counter stronger military powers.⁵⁹ In addition to developing a variety of dedicated EW platforms, it has embraced the concept of Integrated Network Electronic Warfare (INEW), which seeks to meld EW and computer network into a “hybrid capability.” As one assessment notes, “INEW promises to make network warfare relevant to areas traditionally dominated

- 55 Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), p. xvi.
- 56 For useful assessments of China's interest in the various aspects of information warfare, see Stokes, “China's Quest for Joint Aerospace Power: Concepts and Future Aspirations”; Kevin Pollpeter, “Controlling the Information Domain: Space, Cyber, and Electronic Warfare,” in Ashley J. Tellis and Travis Tanner, eds., *Strategic Asia 2012–13: China's Military Challenge* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2012); and Larry Wortzel, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Information Warfare* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2014).
- 57 OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2012*, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, May 2012), pp. 8–9; OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2014*, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, April 2014), p. 32; and OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, pp. 36–37. On the potential impact of the PLA's counterspace capabilities, see Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.–China Military Scorecard*, chapter 10.
- 58 OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, p. 64. On the potential impact of the PLA's cyber warfare capabilities, see Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.–China Military Scorecard*, chapter 11.
- 59 OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, p. 65; and Stokes, “China's Quest for Joint Aerospace Power: Concepts and Future Aspirations,” p. 41.

by electronic warfare by enabling network attacks to ‘bridge the air-gap’ and enter relatively unprotected, isolated battlefield networks.”⁶⁰

How might China employ some of these information warfare capabilities? One possibility is that they could be used in advance and alongside missile and air forces during a campaign against military targets to undermine an opponent’s willingness to resist and further degrade its ability to retaliate. As Mark Stokes explains, “The PRC views information operations as integral to a successful joint aerospace or firepower campaign.” From its perspective, “Effective military operations rely upon the ability to defend one’s source of information while exploiting and assaulting an opponent’s information structure,” including its command, control, and communications systems.⁶¹ In fact, counter-C4ISR attacks to disrupt critical networks would likely play a crucial role in almost any coercive campaign.

Despite its emphasis on holding at risk U.S. information networks, the PLA also aspires to become a more “informationized” force, a goal it expects to achieve by 2050.⁶² This suggests that it will soon suffer from many of the same vulnerabilities that it has identified in the United States and other advanced militaries. In fact, this trend is already underway. China’s A2/AD network, for example, is extremely dependent on the acquisition, transmission, and use of information from a variety of sources—from broad area surveillance systems that can provide initial queuing for ASBMs to satellite navigation systems that guide land-attack missiles to their targets.

China’s Undersea and Surface Naval Fleets

Given its long history as a continental power focused on defending its frontiers, China has devoted relatively little attention to the maritime domain and, as a result, has generally prized its ground forces over its navy.⁶³ That does not mean the PRC has been immune to threats from the sea. For example, in the decade following the communist victory on the mainland, it had to fend off raids by Kuomintang forces based in Taiwan. Later, as the Sino-Soviet alliance deteriorated and became the Sino-Soviet rivalry, Beijing became increasingly concerned that if a war broke out along their shared border, Moscow might launch an amphibious assault to open a second front. The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was therefore tasked with “near coast defense” during the Cold War and had a negligible ability to operate beyond the territorial waters extending a dozen miles from China’s shoreline. By the 1980s, however, the

60 John Costello and Peter Mattis, “Electronic Warfare and the Renaissance of Chinese Information Operations,” in Joe McReynolds, ed., *China’s Evolving Military Strategy* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, August 16, 2016), p. 171.

61 Stokes, “China’s Quest for Joint Aerospace Power: Concepts and Future Aspirations,” p. 41.

62 Kevin Pollpeter, “Towards an Integrative C4ISR System: Informationization and Joint Operations in the People’s Liberation Army,” in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, eds., *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2010).

63 M. Taylor Fravel, “Securing Borders: China’s Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, nos. 4–5, August–October 2007.

PLAN expanded its operational focus to include the entire first island chain and embraced the notion of “near seas active defense.”⁶⁴ According to one analyst, this strategy “aims to reunify Taiwan with the mainland, restore lost and disputed maritime territories, protect China’s maritime resources, secure major SLOCs [sea lines of communication] in times of war, deter and defend against foreign aggression from the sea, and achieve strategic nuclear deterrence.” Today, the PLAN is laying the foundation for “far seas operations,” an even more expansive strategy that emphasizes operations within and beyond the waters surrounded by the second island chain.⁶⁵

China’s naval capabilities have grown along with its ambitions, although its path to becoming a genuine (albeit partial) sea power has been unique. To date, it seems that Beijing has been determined to avoid going head-to-head with local naval powers such as Japan or extra-regional naval powers such as the United States. Rather than emulating its rivals by fielding blue water forces, it has placed a heavy emphasis on asymmetric military capabilities—namely, ground-based sea-denial systems such as coastal defense cruise missiles, maritime strike aircraft, and anti-ship ballistic missiles, all of which can be employed from the relative safety of its own territory.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the PLA has accelerated its development of more traditional naval capabilities in recent years, including both undersea and surface naval forces. Alongside land-based A2/AD systems, these capabilities could be used to deny as well as control territory in the maritime commons. Over time, they might even allow Beijing to project military power into distant regions such as the Indian Ocean in a militarily meaningful way.⁶⁷

Undersea warfare has actually been a PLAN area of emphasis for some time and continues to be a priority.⁶⁸ For instance, its submarine fleet—which is expected to reach approximately 75 boats by the end of this decade—is increasingly composed of modern diesel-electric platforms that are well armed and difficult to detect. This includes a dozen Russian-made Kilo-class submarines, eight of which are armed with the supersonic SS-N-27 anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM), and more than two-dozen indigenously produced Song- and Yuan-class boats, the latter of which are equipped with air-independent propulsion systems. In addition, the PLAN

64 China’s near seas include the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea.

65 Nan Li, “The Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From ‘Near Coast’ and ‘Near Seas’ to ‘Far Seas,’” in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011), quote on p. 118. See also Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: ONI, 2015), p. 7.

66 This relative safety is a product of two factors. As noted above, land-based conventional precision-strike systems such as mobile missile launchers can be difficult to neutralize given their small size, large numbers, ability to relocate quickly after firing their payloads, and ability to use camouflage, concealment, and deception to reduce their signature. In addition, opponents might be reluctant to strike targets located on China’s territory given concerns over escalation.

67 For competing explanations of the PRC’s growing interest in naval power projection capabilities, see Robert S. Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response,” *International Security* 34, no. 2, Fall 2009; and Michael A. Glosny, Phillip C. Saunders, and Robert S. Ross, “Debating China’s Naval Nationalism,” *International Security* 35, no. 2, Fall 2010.

68 ONI, *The People’s Liberation Army Navy: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics* (Washington, DC: ONI, 2009), p. 20.

has a pair of second-generation nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) and plans to build four more. The Pentagon also expects it to field a nuclear-powered cruise missile submarine (SSGN), which could give China a stealthy, extended-range land-attack capability. Beijing's surface naval forces are expanding and improving as well. The PLAN has been rapidly building surface combatants of various types, including corvettes and missile patrol boats for operations in littoral waters as well as destroyers and frigates for operations throughout China's near and far seas. These platforms are also closing the qualitative gap with their Japanese and American equivalents. The PLAN's newest destroyers, for example, not only incorporate a vertical launch system that enables them to carry a variety of munitions, but they are also equipped with phased-array radars and long-range surface-to-air missiles that significantly increase China's area air-defense capability. In addition, the PLAN has already conducted sea trials with its first aircraft carrier, a refurbished Ukrainian platform, and most observers believe that it will produce several more carriers of its own construction over the next decade.⁶⁹

These improvements in undersea and surface naval forces are bolstering China's ability to restrict or deny access to the area, for instance by enhancing its anti-surface warfare (ASuW) capabilities and extending its air defenses. As noted above, when combined with other A2/AD systems such as land-based conventional precision-strike capabilities, they could eventually put the PRC in a position to seize control over contested areas in the East and South China Sea or interdict the lines of communication running through the region—depending on how the United States and its local allies respond.

Despite its rapid naval modernization, China does have weaknesses that the United States should be mindful of. For instance, although the PLAN has significantly increased its ability to conduct ASuW, it has yet to become proficient in other key areas, such as antisubmarine warfare and joint operations.⁷⁰ In addition, surface naval forces are becoming increasingly vulnerable to maritime reconnaissance-strike complexes that consist of broad-area surveillance systems, real-time communications links, and highly accurate munitions. In fact, China's own A2/AD network is based on the assumption that mobile but high-signature platforms can be held at risk, both from the land and from the sea. Lastly, China's undersea force is still comprised mainly of diesel-electric boats. Although they can be effective in littoral waters or near maritime chokepoints, they are also highly dependent on shore-based infrastructure for sustainment given their limited endurance, and are generally restricted to patrolling relatively small geographic areas given their slow speed—especially if they hope to conserve power in order to remain submerged and operate without being detected.

69 See OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, pp. 25–28; and ONI, *The PLA Navy*, pp. 14–19; and Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Naval Capabilities: Issues and Background for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 17, 2016).

70 O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization*, p. 6.

Conclusion

The emergence of any new great power is bound to pose significant challenges for existing great powers, and the case of China is no exception. With its large size and long history, not to mention its complex internal politics and complicated relations with neighbors, managing China's rise will be a difficult task. This is especially true given the multidimensional nature of its growing military power. Beijing is currently upgrading its nuclear arsenal, improving its conventional forces across the board, and building paramilitary capabilities that dwarf those of other nations and give it unique options for challenging the status quo. For the United States, however, China's A2/AD systems will remain the most significant potential threat. Not only will they make it riskier for Washington to fulfill its responsibilities in the region and perhaps even weaken its system of alliances, but they could also underpin the use of paramilitary coercion and help Beijing engage in territorial aggrandizement. Looking forward, the United States will need to maintain a military strategy that best takes this threat into account and field the types of capabilities to make that strategy credible and effective.

CHAPTER 3

In Defense of Forward Defense

As the previous chapters have explained, the core objectives of postwar U.S. grand strategy since at least the end of World War II—preventing hostile actors from dominating critical regions, protecting frontline allies located in these areas, and preserving freedom of the commons across the globe—are as relevant today as they have ever been. Yet the military foundations of global leadership and engagement are under more stress now than at any point since the start of the unipolar moment more than two and a half decades ago. This tension is particularly evident in East Asia—a region that multiple presidential administrations have argued should be the focal point for U.S. strategy, but one that is also in the midst of a significant transformation.

Like many of its predecessors throughout history, China is an emerging great power that appears dissatisfied with the current distribution of territory, influence, and prestige. This is despite benefiting enormously from the existing international order, which has facilitated its economic growth. The PRC is also translating its considerable wealth into coercive power that it could use to challenge the status quo within its immediate neighborhood and perhaps eventually beyond. In fact, this is already beginning to take place in both the East and South China Seas. Of greatest concern for the United States, Beijing is investing heavily in capabilities that are likely to make U.S. and allied conventional military operations in the region—from patrolling the air and maritime commons on a regular basis to reinforcing partner nations when tensions are high—much more difficult.

How can the United States sustain its grand strategy and achieve its core objectives under these conditions? The answer to this question rests in large part on the defense strategy it chooses and its ability to implement that strategy effectively. To date, Washington's preferred option in critical regions like East Asia can be described broadly as forward defense. This strategy prioritizes preparing to counter threats when and where they materialize rather than responding directly long after aggression has occurred or responding indirectly by imposing costs in other theaters. Of course, the specific features of forward defense have varied at different times and in different places. This is especially true when it comes to the relative

emphasis that Washington has placed on concentrating its forces in strongpoints overseas versus dispatching expeditionary forces when crises arise.⁷¹ Nevertheless, by clearly and credibly signaling that the United States will oppose an adversary's aims and come to the assistance of its allies, forward defense has underpinned both deterrence and assurance—and, as a result, has underwritten stability in the regions where it matters most.

Looking ahead, forward defense remains the best strategy option for the United States in the Asia-Pacific. This is due to the high stakes involved as well as the negative consequences that could result if Washington opts for a delayed response or plans for a peripheral campaign. Although critics of forward defense have made the case for alternative strategies, these approaches would have significant downsides that could jeopardize U.S. interests in the region and heighten the prospects for instability. The United States will have to adapt its current defense strategy to manage new operational challenges, however—for instance, by integrating land power with its concepts for air and maritime power projection.

Alternative Defense Strategies in the Asia-Pacific Region

What is the best framework for thinking about U.S. defense strategy in general and defense strategy options for the Asia-Pacific in particular? The United States is fundamentally a status quo power in the region, one that aims to uphold existing international rules, preclude territorial aggrandizement, and avoid situations in which local nations become willing to concede a sphere of influence to stronger actors with revisionist aspirations.⁷² Given this orientation, there are three main alternatives that it could pursue to keep the peace, which are distinct in terms of when and how they would deal with overt aggression: *denial*, *punishment*, and *rollback*.

- Denial would emphasize stopping an adversary from using force to achieve its objectives in the first place. This could entail both defensive and offensive damage limitation efforts to avoid significant losses when a conflict breaks out, withstand a protracted coercive campaign, and gradually attrite an opponent's combat power.
- Punishment would place less weight on blunting an adversary's initial assault and preventing it from overturning the status quo. Instead, it would prioritize retaliation in the aftermath of these developments. The main goal would be to impose costs that outweigh the benefits of aggression and, therefore, convince an opponent to relinquish any gains—for instance, through direct attacks on its territory, peripheral campaigns to deprive it of valuable assets abroad, or blockade operations to undermine its economy.

⁷¹ Pettyjohn, *U.S. Global Defense Posture, 1783–2011*.

⁷² A regional sphere of influence could take different forms. One possibility, for instance, is “Finlandization,” or a situation where a weaker nation retains its autonomy in domestic affairs and is not a satellite of a more powerful neighbor, yet is aligned with that neighbor and gives it de facto veto power over certain foreign and defense policies. See Andrew F. Krepinevich, “China’s ‘Finlandization’ Strategy in the Western Pacific,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 2010.

- Rollback would also downplay efforts to preserve the status quo from the outset in favor of subsequent efforts to restore the status quo ante, although it would rely more heavily on brute force than coercion by trying to reverse an adversary's progress directly. Specifically, this option would entail acting alone or alongside allies to retake lost territory and put it back in friendly hands, in addition to degrading an opponent's military power so that it no longer poses a serious threat.

These three approaches are not necessarily exhaustive and, more importantly, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, if a conflict did occur, the United States might find itself incorporating elements of all three or moving from one to another, depending on the specific circumstances. From a planning perspective, however, these ideal types are likely to have a significant influence over the size and composition of U.S. forces, where they are positioned, how they interact with allied militaries, and how they plan to fight.

Denial, for example, is the default option for the United States in the Asia-Pacific given its objectives, formal commitments to treaty allies, and considerable military presence throughout the area. Moreover, policymakers in Washington have given no indication they are seriously considering a departure from this approach. If anything, they appear determined to make denial more effective over the long run by improving the ability of U.S. forces to operate in highly contested environments. Nevertheless, as China's military has grown much stronger in recent years, calls for the United States to consider alternatives such as punishment or rollback have grown louder, even though these options are rarely fleshed out in great detail and have substantial drawbacks that should be identified and addressed.

Punishment in the form of a distant maritime blockade is arguably the chief alternative to denial.⁷³ It is also intuitively attractive in a number of ways. Continued economic growth underpins the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is central to President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" of national prosperity and global influence. Consequently, threatening to interrupt that growth could be a source of significant leverage. China's economy is also heavily dependent on exported goods and imported resources that must be shipped across lengthy sea-lanes and pass through distant chokepoints, none of which the PLA can adequately monitor, patrol, or protect. In principle, therefore, the United States could exploit its command of the global commons for the purpose of economic warfare: interdicting goods and resources, imposing significant costs on China, and doing so in ways that Beijing has little ability to counter directly. As an added benefit, this option would also allow the United States to avoid the escalation risks associated with striking targets on the Chinese mainland during a conflict, which is a very real possibility in the case of denial given that so many of the PRC's coercive capabilities—along with supporting infrastructure such as bases, ports, and C4ISR systems—are located on its territory.

⁷³ See, for example, Sean Mirski, "Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3, 2013; Jeffrey E. Kline and Wayne P. Hughes Jr., "Between Peace and the Air-Sea Battle: A War at Sea Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 4, Autumn 2012, pp. 35–41; and T.X. Hammes, "Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy," *Infinity Journal* 2, no. 2, Spring 2012.

Rollback would also represent a sharp departure from a strategy of denial. In this case, the United States would rely first and foremost on local nations to deter major threats and, if necessary, to resist any assault for as long as possible. That, in turn, would enable it to reduce its overseas military presence and perhaps scale back its force structure as well. Should intervention become necessary, Washington could then mobilize additional forces as needed and reintroduce them into the theater when ready. Rather than gradually increasing pressure on an aggressor until it alters its behavior, which is how punishment would theoretically unfold, the United States would concentrate its efforts on reinforcing local nations under duress, attriting that aggressor’s military power, and evicting it from any occupied territory. In many respects, this approach would be similar to the one that the United States adopted during both world wars. It would, therefore, be the logical corollary to a grand strategy of offshore balancing and consistent with U.S. retrenchment from many of its security commitments.

Assessing Denial, Punishment, and Rollback

Despite any virtues they might have, the alternatives to denial share two fundamental and interrelated limitations. First, whereas denial would not prevent the United States from resorting to punishment or rollback, punishment or rollback would restrict its ability to employ denial. In other words, if the United States tried but failed to stop an adversary from achieving its objectives, it could still choose to implement a distant blockade or mobilize additional forces to restore the status quo ante bellum. Yet the reverse is not necessarily true.⁷⁴ Second, opting not to contest aggression from the outset and allowing an opponent to overturn the status quo before mounting a response could increase instability and harm U.S. interests in a variety of ways. For instance, an adversary might be more tempted to engage in coercion or execute a *fait accompli*, especially if it calculates that it can achieve its objectives quickly, consolidate initial gains, and withstand any potential reprisal, presuming one is forthcoming. Meanwhile, allies would have little reason to side with the United States in peacetime—costing Washington influence and support within the region—and might become more willing to consider bandwagoning behavior. Ultimately, as one astute observer notes, “The most credible deterrent to aggression is one that persuades the adversary that his forces will be unlikely to achieve the operational objectives assigned to them because of a combination of the capabilities of the defending forces and the will to employ them.”⁷⁵ Adopting punishment or rollback would undermine both aspects of this equation.

74 In some situations, a strategy of denial might still be possible if a maritime blockade or rollback campaign failed. For example, if China seized islands along its periphery, and if the United States was unable to compel a withdrawal through economic warfare or dislodge occupying troops through military action, it could attempt to interdict supplies to those islands, isolate them, and gradually make China’s position operationally unsustainable. Nevertheless, the chief objective of denial is still to prevent an opponent from making gains in the first place.

75 David Ochmanek, *Sustaining U.S. Leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region: Why a Strategy of Direct Defense Against Antiaccess and Area Denial Threats Is Desirable and Feasible* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), p. 12. See also Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, “Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1, Spring 2015.

In addition to these common weaknesses, punishment and rollback each have distinct problems. For example, a successful maritime blockade would have to overcome the many operational challenges associated with identifying, seizing, and disposing of commercial ships traveling to and from an opponent's ports, which are hardly trivial. It would also need to compensate for China's ability to withstand economic coercion through extensive stockpiling, government rationing, the use of overland transportation routes, and the transshipment of key goods and resources through other countries. Moreover, there is no guarantee that escalation would be any easier to control with a maritime blockade than it would be if the United States engaged in active denial efforts. Because the CCP is insecure enough to make regime survival its chief priority, depends on economic growth for its continued legitimacy, and is already managing domestic unrest that could grow worse in the face of a sharp economic downturn, this form of punishment could be far more escalatory than some proponents acknowledge.⁷⁶

For its part, rollback would put enormous emphasis on frontline nations, not only to deter conflict if possible but also to fight them after a conflict broke out. Specifically, these nations would need to impose costs on an adversary, buy time for the United States to ready its forces, and provide support once Washington was finally prepared to intervene. Yet this would be a risky bet given the limited military capacity of local nations relative to China as well as the longstanding tensions that would make cooperation between them difficult, especially in the wake of a U.S. withdrawal. Moreover, one ostensible virtue of this approach is that it would allow the United States to scale back its force structure because it would not need to fight right away. But it could take Washington years to rebuild lost military capacity given that global power projection depends on extremely complex platforms and highly skilled troops. Finally, even if the United States did pull back from the Asia-Pacific with the intention of re-engaging if necessary, it would still need many of the same military capabilities that are critical to forward defense—most importantly capabilities that are survivable enough to redeploy into a contested environment and conduct operations there effectively.⁷⁷

In sum, there is still a strong case for the United States to emphasize denial in the Asia-Pacific region as it decides how to manage China's military rise. Not only does it make a significant contribution to deterrence and assurance by guaranteeing that Washington will resist aggression and assist its allies, but the primary alternatives—punishment and rollback—also have serious limitations that would not be easy to overcome. Consequently, abandoning forward defense would be a very risky proposition. That does not mean this strategy is adequate in its current form, however. Given emerging challenges, most importantly China's pursuit of A2/AD capabilities that are making power projection more difficult, the United States will need to adapt forward defense to ensure its continued viability. In particular, as the PRC continues to become more powerful and the precision-strike regime continues to mature, Washington must

76 Montgomery, "Rethinking a Naval Blockade of China"; and Gabriel B. Collins and William S. Murray, "No Oil for the Lamps of China," *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 2, Spring 2008.

77 Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific."

devise ways to either avoid or ameliorate a pair of dilemmas that are described below: the combat power deficit and the warfighting-presence paradox.

Adapting Forward Defense to Manage the Rise of China

Perhaps the most significant consideration that should influence the future design of forward defense is the possibility of a U.S. *combat power deficit* in the Asia-Pacific region, one that stems from a confluence of three factors: enduring geopolitical constraints, the underlying characteristics of Washington's overseas force posture, and China's improving A2/AD capabilities.⁷⁸

First, as a remote power with global security commitments, the United States can only maintain a limited (although in some cases still quite large) peacetime military presence in key regions. Therefore it must rely on expeditionary forces to supplement that presence when instability is on the rise and conflict appears imminent. China, by contrast, is principally a regional military power. Thus it can focus its effort and attention on local contingencies, including those involving a clash with the United States. Put differently, geography will have a major impact on the amount of combat power that each side can bring to bear, especially at the start of a crisis.

Second, the forces that the United States depends upon most to generate combat power in the Asia-Pacific region are becoming increasingly vulnerable. To establish control of the air or strike large numbers of targets on the ground, the United States would lean heavily on fixed-wing fighters operating from nearby land and sea bases. Yet airbases and aircraft carriers are few in number, easy to locate, and hard to defend. Although the United States also possesses long-range strike platforms that are not tied to theater bases, most of these platforms cannot penetrate defended airspace and, therefore, would need to employ standoff munitions, which have limited utility against certain types of targets (namely, mobile targets that can relocate while standoff weapons are in flight and hardened targets that can only be neutralized by munitions too large to be carried by these weapons). Similarly, while the United States also has submarines that are extremely survivable in A2/AD environments and can be equipped for a variety of offensive missions, they have shallow magazines and cannot easily reload in contested environments.

Third, as detailed in the previous chapter, China is developing the means to exploit these vulnerabilities. Moreover, its ability to do so would be magnified if it launched an attack with little warning. Even two prominent analysts who are skeptical that China's A2/AD systems will alter the regional balance of power caution that the PLA could "eventually deploy a surprise-attack capability that could wipe out U.S. fixed infrastructure in the region, destroy aircraft

78 Evan Braden Montgomery, "Managing China's Missile Threat: Future Options to Preserve Forward Defense," Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on "China's Offensive Missile Forces: Implications for the United States," April 1, 2015.

parked on bases, sink much of any peacetime U.S. surface-naval presence forward deployed in nearby waters, and destroy U.S. satellites.”⁷⁹

Taken together, these three factors suggest that the United States could face an unfavorable asymmetry when it comes to generating combat power at the start of a conflict. If so, deterrence could suffer, and crisis stability could erode. In the worst-case scenario, China might be able to inflict a “knockout blow” or something dangerously close to it. This asymmetry could even extend into the later stages of a war given that Washington must deploy and sustain reinforcements over exterior lines of communication that are potentially vulnerable to interdiction, whereas Beijing can support its own forces over interior lines that are much more secure. Thus, China could have a strong incentive to “ride out” any counterattacks because of the challenges the United States would confront during a protracted campaign.

There are steps that the United States could take to avoid, close, or reverse this combat power deficit in the Asia-Pacific, such as rebalancing air combat capabilities to emphasize penetrating long-range platforms and expanding its undersea strike capacity.⁸⁰ In fact, the Pentagon is taking important steps in both areas, for instance by planning to procure the new B-21 stealth bomber in much larger numbers than its predecessor, the B-2, as well as committing to build future Virginia-class SSNs with added payload modules to increase the number of weapons they can carry. Nevertheless, these measures highlight and could even exacerbate another dilemma of forward defense that the United States will need to address, namely, the *warfighting-presence paradox*.

The insight at the heart of this dilemma is straightforward: On the one hand, military capabilities that have the most operational value in contested environments and should, therefore, contribute most to deterring and defeating potential adversaries may not contribute much to assuring frontline allies. On the other hand, military capabilities that have traditionally contributed most to assurance because their presence epitomizes U.S. security commitments could become less useful for deterrence because they are increasingly vulnerable in a conflict.⁸¹ Put another way, the United States will need to depend more and more on low-signature capabilities for warfighting—including bombers that are based outside the theater and submarines that operate out of sight—because signature reduction is critical to survivability in a precision-strike regime. Yet the U.S. has long relied on its most high signature assets—such as carrier strike groups and forward-based air wings—for the global presence that helps convince allies it

79 Biddle and Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific,” p. 29.

80 Other important steps that the United States could take to address the combat power deficit include developing more effective and less expensive active defenses (such as lasers, electromagnetic railguns, and existing powder guns with new projectiles) to protect forward operating locations and surface naval assets from incoming missile salvos, as well as placing more emphasis on passive defenses (such as hardened shelters, aircraft dispersal options, and rapid runway repair capabilities) to help fixed bases withstand assaults.

81 For a similar distinction, see Zack Cooper, “The Visibility–Vulnerability Dilemma and Defense,” *CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, January 7, 2015, available at <https://amti.csis.org/the-visibility-vulnerability-dilemma-and-the-defense-debate/>.

will stand by their side. This dilemma raises a critical question when it comes to the future of forward defense: how can the United States continue to deter and assure at the same time?

There is a possible course of action that might help to resolve both the combat power deficit and the warfighting-presence paradox: better-integrating land power into a forward defense strategy for the Asia-Pacific region. Typically, ground forces have played only a minor role in discussions of defense strategy toward China, mainly because any conflict between the United States and the PRC would not likely center on a clash of ground maneuver elements but rather a major air and maritime fight. Consequently, U.S. ground forces in general and the U.S. Army, in particular, would largely be relegated to a supporting role. That could change, however, if the United States opted to emulate China by fielding mobile, land-based missile forces of its own, which would allow it to take advantage of the many benefits that these systems can provide.

For instance, mobile, forward-deployed, land-based anti-ship missiles would enhance U.S. capacity for sea denial during a conflict, including chokepoint defense as well as open-ocean targeting.⁸² The former would entail blocking hostile surface naval forces from exiting the first island chain and encircling U.S. allies like Japan or threatening U.S. reinforcements approaching the region. The latter would involve targeting any surface naval forces or amphibious units attempting to seize disputed territory or interfere with local shipping. In addition, forward-deployed surface-to-surface missiles could provide another option for deep strike; that is, holding at risk key weapons systems or support infrastructure located on an opponent's territory. More generally, thanks to their high degree of survivability as well as their potential effectiveness, these capabilities would increase the amount of combat power that the United States could bring to bear, thus enhancing deterrence and reducing crisis instability. And, so long as they were permanently stationed on allied territory, they would also provide a strong signal of assurance, especially because the United States could not withdraw them quickly or easily.

82 The following paragraph draws on the discussion in Montgomery, "Managing China's Missile Threat." For other assessments of the role that U.S. land-based missiles could play in the Asia-Pacific region, see Terrence R. Kelly et al., *Employing Land-Based Anti-Ship Missiles in the Western Pacific*, Technical Report (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013); Jim Thomas, "Why the Army Needs Missiles," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 3, May/June 2013; James R. Holmes, "Defend the First Island Chain," *Proceedings*, U.S. Naval Institute, 140, no. 4, April 2014; and Andrew F. Krepinevich, "How to Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2015.

Conclusion

The United States has a number of defense strategy options for the Asia-Pacific, including some that are clearly consistent with its broader grand strategy objectives in the region and others that would represent a departure from those objectives. For instance, it could plan to resist acts of aggression when and where they occur, adopt indirect approaches such as economic warfare to compel an adversary to back down after it starts a fight, or build up its forces over time and eventually try to reverse any gains that its opponent has made. All of these approaches have pros and cons. In the end, however, the virtues of denial outweigh the appeal of punishment or rollback, both of which have far more problems than proponents are usually willing to admit. Nevertheless, denial in the form of forward defense is likely to become more difficult over time, especially if the United States begins to experience a combat power deficit and the requirements for deterrence and assurance continue to diverge. One way to address these problems would be to incorporate land power into forward defense, specifically by building up land-based missile forces that could simultaneously present China with many of the operational challenges that the United States now confronts and provide a clear signal to local allies that Washington does not intend to pull back from the region.

Conclusion

The United States and China are currently engaged in an intensifying competition for relative power, geopolitical influence, and positional advantage across the Asia-Pacific, one that has heightened tensions between the two nations and increased the odds of a crisis or conflict. Just a few short years ago this assessment might have seemed provocative at best or alarmist at worst. Despite clear conflicts of interest and a shifting distribution of capabilities, Washington and Beijing have had many reasons to downplay their differences and avoid confrontations, including deep economic ties and the shadow of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, recent events have provided more cause for pessimism. They have also raised serious questions that U.S. policymakers will need to grapple with, including whether a grand strategy of global leadership and engagement is still necessary and whether a forward defense strategy in the region is still required. Ultimately, this report has argued that the answer to both questions is “yes.” Although the extent of China’s revisionist aspirations is impossible to know, and might very well be shifting constantly due to both domestic and international considerations, its apparent interest in altering the status quo puts core U.S. interests at risk. That means objectives such as preventing a key region from falling under the sway of a hostile actor, protecting local allies that could be the targets of aggression, and ensuring that the air and maritime commons remain open to all will continue to be relevant. Although no other nation has harnessed the revolution in conventional precision-strike quite like China, creating both military and diplomatic challenges for the United States, forward defense is a far better strategy than other approaches. Alternatives would not only create openings for expansion and coercion but could also require the United States to pay a very steep price if intervention became necessary after a long delay or withdrawal from the region. Nevertheless, Washington will need to shore up the military foundations of its grand strategy in the years ahead—a task that should be a priority for the new administration.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
ASAT	anti-satellite
ASBM	anti-ship ballistic missile
ASCM	anti-ship cruise missile
ASuW	anti-surface warfare
C2	command and control
C4ISR	Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSBA	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
EW	electronic warfare
GDP	gross domestic product
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
INEW	Integrated Network Electronic Warfare
IRBM	intermediate-range ballistic missile
LACM	land-attack cruise missile
MIRV	multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle
MRBM	medium-range ballistic missile
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ONI	Office of Naval Intelligence
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SLOC	sea lines of communication
SRBM	short-range ballistic missile
SSBN	ballistic missile submarine
SSGN	nuclear-powered cruise missile submarine
SSN	nuclear-powered attack submarine



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

1667 K Street, NW, Suite 900

Washington, DC 20006

Tel. 202-331-7990 • Fax 202-331-8019

www.csbaonline.org