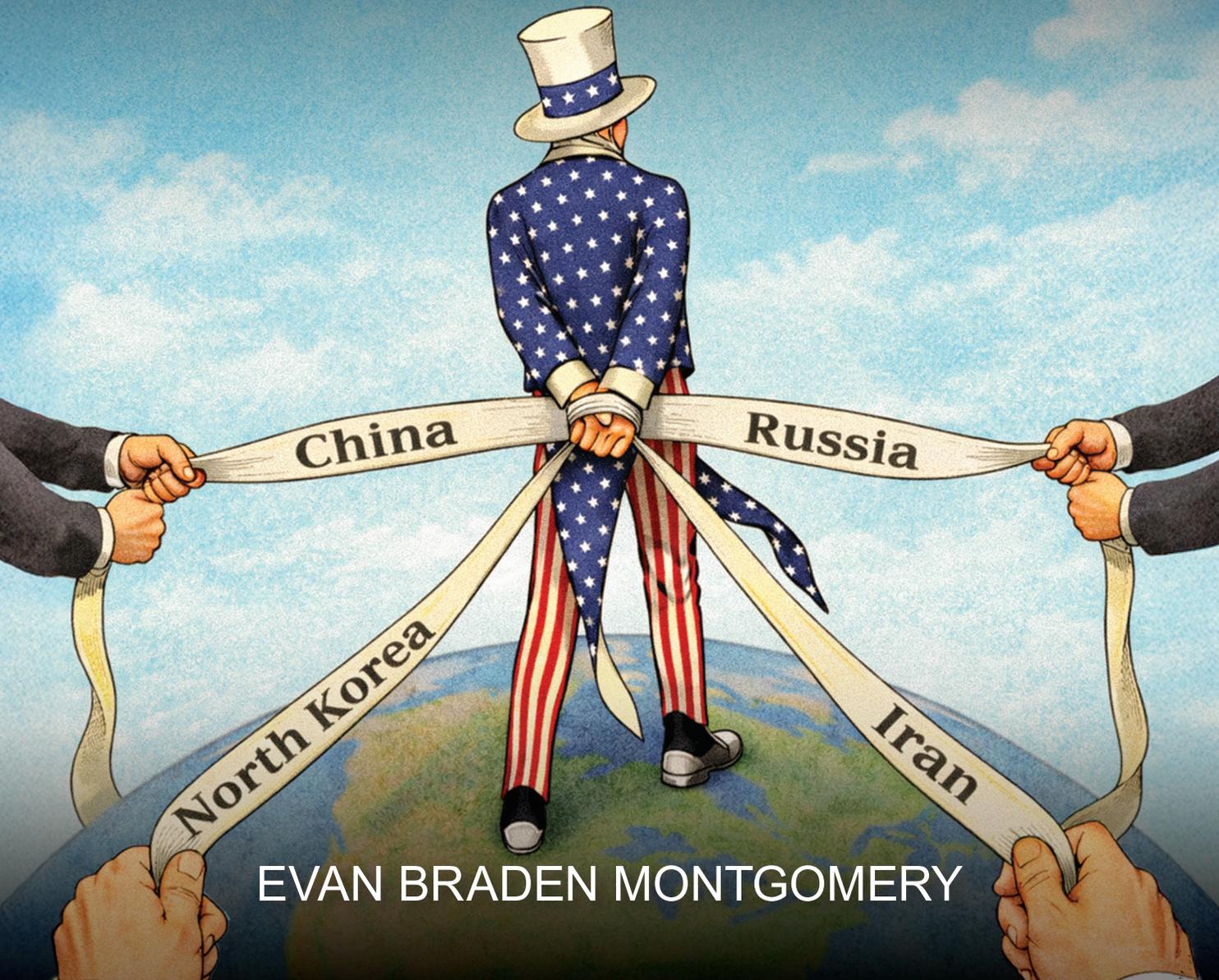


CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

BREAKING THE DOUBLE BIND

U.S. DEFENSE STRATEGY AND
MULTI-THEATER DETERRENCE



EVAN BRADEN MONTGOMERY

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Executive Summary

Russia's repeated acts of aggression against its neighbors, North Korea's expanding nuclear arsenal, Iran's enduring status as a source of instability, and most importantly China's emergence as a military peer of the United States are prompting renewed debates over America's role in the world, including how Washington should assess, prioritize, and uphold its commitments. The upshot of these debates thus far has been a rebalance toward the Indo-Pacific, a renewed emphasis on great-power competition, and a heightened focus on China, especially for the Department of Defense

On its face, focusing more on China is neither surprising nor unsound. Simply put, China's size, wealth, ambition, and military strength set it apart from any other U.S. rival. Nevertheless, there are reasons to question the extent to which the United States can or should deprioritize other rivalries while confronting an emerging peer competitor. Russia may no longer be in the same league as China; North Korea is much less powerful than both; and Iran is weaker than all three, especially after the Israeli and American military operations against it. Yet these states continue to pose significant and, in some cases, growing threats to their regions.

In addition, there is ample room to debate how the United States should manage the military dimensions of the China challenge, how it should deal with other rivals, and perhaps most consequentially how it can best reconcile these competing demands. Deterring aggression by China will only become more difficult—and defeating aggression will only become more costly—as its military capabilities continue to improve. The second-order consequences of the Sino-U.S. competition and a potential Sino-U.S. conflict will also become much more stark under these conditions. With an intensifying rivalry and the growing prospect of a protracted war against a military peer, the odds of opportunistic aggression by other rivals are likely to rise. As U.S. rivals escalate their military cooperation with one another, the chances of second-tier adversaries providing direct or indirect support to Washington's pacing threat could increase sharply as well.

This report weighs in on these issues by making three main arguments. First, barring a radical shift in U.S. grand strategy, there are serious limits to how much the United States

can deprioritize its secondary rivals, narrow its geographic focus, and concentrate on military competition against China within the first island chain that rings Northeast and Southeast Asia. This is particularly true now that U.S. adversaries across the globe are cooperating more closely, which means the dangers they pose are increasingly interconnected. Despite an ongoing rebalance toward the Indo-Pacific, the return of great power competition, and a renewed effort to restore military advantages over China, the United States still faces the prospect of military contingencies against different adversaries in regions that U.S. policymakers have traditionally identified as critical to U.S. national interests. Yet focusing more narrowly on China in a multi-theater, multi-rival world creates openings for other rivals to challenge the status quo within their regions because they face fewer barriers to hostile behavior.

Just as concerning, an increased focus on China also incentivizes collaboration between those rivals across regions. Beijing, for example, may look for more opportunities to work with the likes of Russia, North Korea, and Iran in hopes that Washington will continue to diffuse its defense resources across the globe. Those states, in turn, may seek new ways to work with Beijing as it competes, clashes with, or recovers from a conflict with the United States, so Washington is compelled to concentrate its resources against its main rival. This dynamic puts U.S. policymakers in a double bind and creates a situation in which the failure to manage secondary rivals could magnify problems posed by the pacing threat.

Second, Washington's implicit approach to managing risks from all its rivals is becoming less sustainable. That approach rests on treating China as a pacing threat and trying to achieve a rapid and decisive victory if deterrence fails and Beijing launches an invasion of Taiwan. If the United States can prevent a military *fait accompli* by quickly executing a lethal denial campaign against Chinese military and paramilitary forces, then it should still be well positioned to deal with other potential threats, especially if it can do so alongside allies and partners that are capable of playing a bigger military role than they might have in the past. As the Sino-American military balance continues to evolve and the prospects for a quick and clear-cut U.S. victory decrease, however, Washington not only will find itself in a worse position vis-à-vis Beijing, but it could also find itself losing ground to other adversaries.

Although a quick and convincing victory against China at acceptable costs might have been plausible at the peak of American military power, or perhaps even later if Washington had gotten an earlier start on seriously adapting the Joint Force to China's military modernization, those conditions no longer seem to exist—and it is questionable whether they might return. Instead, any conflict against China is likely to be long and costly, especially a large-scale conventional conflict over the fate of Taiwan. Because Washington's capacity to hold secondary rivals in check turns in large part on its ability to handle its pacing threat, this could lead to the worst of both worlds: a situation in which U.S. forces might not be optimally designed and postured to deal with the China threat as it now is, yet are also suboptimized to deal with the other threats that remain. In other words, the United

States may be getting China wrong—and if it gets China wrong, then it will get other threats wrong, too.

Third, to better compete with China and manage global risks under these conditions, Washington should adapt its approach to deterring and potentially fighting Beijing by placing less stress on a denial campaign in defense of Taiwan and more emphasis on a punishment campaign in the context of a protracted conflict—that is, a campaign to degrade not just China’s frontline military forces but also its military industrial capacity and economic power. Doing so would more accurately reflect the realities of great power war, reduce the possibility of a Pyrrhic victory in a clash over Taiwan or a similar scenario, and prioritize new ways of imposing costs on Beijing, both during peacetime and in conflict. It would also emphasize the development of flexible combat capabilities—especially those with the global reach and fungibility to be employed across a variety of theaters and missions—that could be used to deter or, if necessary, fight secondary rivals alongside local allies and partners.

Rather than placing maximum emphasis on denial of a Taiwan invasion, Washington should embrace a strategy of *minimum essential denial and protracted punishment*. This would entail raising the costs of a Chinese assault on Taiwan without elevating the defense of Taiwan over the defeat of China, even if this comes at the price of putting the island in more immediate danger. It should involve preparing to inflict a variety of costs on the PRC over the course of a military campaign that might be longer and more geographically expansive than the short, sharp, force-on-force conflicts that military organizations often prefer. It should also preserve sufficient capabilities that can be used to impose costs on other adversaries if they engage in aggression.

By no means should the United States abandon the goal of deterring or responding to the invasion threat. Doing so would only leave Taiwan isolated, make invasion more likely, undermine regional alliances, and put Washington in a disadvantageous position if Beijing turns out to be less capable or less cost acceptant than most observers expect. But it should acknowledge that going “all in” to deny an invasion of Taiwan could come at an enormous cost, even assuming that a conflict does not escalate to nuclear use, undermining U.S. power and influence regionally and globally.

What would an adjustment in regional defense strategy and an alternative approach to multi-theater deterrence mean for the composition and character of the Joint Force? Changes in force structure are certainly necessary. Indeed, the bind the Pentagon now finds itself in can be explained in part by the mismatch that has long existed between the capabilities it has often prioritized (those with relatively limited range, large signatures, and low payloads) and the capabilities that are widely understood to be the most useful against its current pacing threat (those with longer range, lower signatures, and larger payloads). The Pentagon should embrace many of these changes, though, regardless of the strategy it adopts. In other words, there is considerable overlap in the capabilities needed to support a maximal denial campaign or a punishment campaign. Whether Washington opts to retain

its current approach to countering China and managing global risks or chooses instead to shift away from the status quo, some of the biggest decisions it faces should produce many of the same results.

For example, regardless of how the United States planned to deter and, if necessary, fight China, it will need a more robust defense industrial base capable of greater output, whether to stockpile munitions for a short but intense fight or to increase magazine depth for a lengthy conflict. It will require more platforms with the range to operate over long distances and the survivability to operate in highly contested environments, whether those platforms would be employed to attrite adversary forces in the epicenter of Beijing's precision-strike complex or to conduct raids farther afield as part of a global cost-imposing campaign. And it will benefit from unmanned systems that could supplement, complement, and perhaps in some cases replace crewed platforms to enhance fleet size, firepower, sensing, and protection.

Yet this capability overlap across different defense strategies also means that many of the most important questions Washington faces are not related to force structure per se but rather to politics and strategy—that is, when, why, and how its forces are employed, as well as the risks it should avoid or accept. Less emphasis on denial would require reconsidering assumptions about the speed and scale of any intervention in defense of Taiwan, the amount of attrition Washington should aim to inflict on adversary forces in the course of that intervention, and most importantly how much risk it is willing to accept to its own forces during an initial campaign (especially to the forces that are most useful for punishment).

At the same time, however, an alternative strategy might mean embracing other risks to amplify the effectiveness of the forces that are still devoted to denial. Descriptions of maximal denial often focus on fighting adversary forces in, above, and below the Taiwan Strait. The reasons seem to include reducing the escalatory dangers associated with striking targets on the Chinese mainland and increasing, or at least not degrading, the resilience of Taiwanese defenders by fighting nearer to the island's shoreline. Scaling back denial while maintaining a credible threat to disrupt (if not defeat) an invasion might require Washington to adjust its risk tolerance on both fronts and walk back these self-imposed constraints. Expanding the geographic scope of a denial campaign in two directions through a greater willingness to go deep and fight close in would mean counting on nuclear deterrence to hold and Taiwanese forces to hold out. But it would also enable the Joint Force to mount a broader counterinvasion campaign rather than a narrower counteramphibious landing operation—maximizing the disruption it could inflict on the PLA early on while minimizing the force structure devoted to that cause.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The defining feature of U.S. grand strategy is the expansive scope of American security commitments.¹ From the dawn of the international order that the United States forged in the aftermath of the Second World War, Washington has pledged to protect dozens of allies and partners from external threats, thereby extending deterrence over distant regions. It has prevented hostile powers from establishing control over Europe, East Asia, or the Middle East, all of which successive generations of American policymakers have deemed vital to U.S. national interests because of their wealth, productive capacity, and geographic position. It has provided public goods that underpin an open global economy, including freedom of navigation in the maritime and air commons. And it has done all of this from a sense of enlightened self-interest; that is, Washington has shouldered these burdens in hopes of preserving American security, enhancing American prosperity, and avoiding a regional or global conflagration that could jeopardize both.²

Maintaining these commitments has never been easy, but the risks associated with global engagement have often been masked by American military strength, especially in recent decades when the United States could count on conventional overmatch in a clash with any

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- 1 On the main attributes of U.S. grand strategy, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 21, no. 3, Winter 1996/97, esp. pp. 30–41; 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 2012/13; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Hal Brands, “Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2, February 2018. For one of the earliest statements on the importance of preventing rivals from dominating key regions, see Nicholas J. Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942; repr. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008).
 - 2 John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

rival.³ The decline and dissolution of the Soviet Union left Washington with a nearly unprecedented degree of relative power.⁴ Building on this foundation, it continued to spend more on defense than any other nation; preserve and extend its network of alliances and security partnerships; and field the world's best-trained, best-equipped, and most-experienced armed forces, notwithstanding a significant post–Cold War peace dividend and the painful post-9/11 wars.⁵

Today, however, U.S. policymakers confront a very different situation, one that appears to be putting military overmatch out of reach. This development would have enormous implications for the effectiveness of U.S. grand strategy and the defense strategies that underpin it. For instance, the proliferation of conventional precision-strike systems has long been eroding Washington's most distinct military advantage—its ability to mobilize, deploy, mass, and sustain forces across the globe—even if this constraint on power projection has largely remained latent until recently.⁶ The spread of nuclear weapons continues to cast a shadow over American extended deterrence commitments, especially as Washington wrestles with more powerful nuclear rivals and takes steps to prevent additional states from crossing the nuclear threshold.⁷ And the willingness of revisionist powers to challenge the status quo using the various coercive tools at their disposal has contributed to a much more

- 3 Evan Braden Montgomery, "Avoiding Fair Fights: Military Superiority and U.S. National Security," *Texas National Security Review*, June 26, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-pursuit-of-military-superiority/>.
- 4 William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1, Summer 1999; and Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1, Summer 2003.
- 5 Indeed, many scholars once claimed that U.S. military advantages were so great that prospective rivals would not even bother to balance against the United States. See, for example, Wohlforth, "Stability of a Unipolar World," esp. p. 18; Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30, no. 1, Summer 2005; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 6 The significant force protection demands associated with Operation Rough Rider, the military campaign against Houthi targets during the first half of 2025, illustrate how the proliferation of conventional precision strike is driving up the costs of power projection. Heather Mongilio, "Operation Rough Rider: 45 Days, 1000 Targets, No End in Sight," *USNI News*, April 29, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/04/29/operation-rough-rider>. On the origins of this trend, see especially Barry D. Watts, *The Maturing Revolution in Military Affairs* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011); Andrew F. Krepinevich, "Get Ready for the Democratization of Destruction," *Foreign Policy*, August 15, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/15/get-ready-for-the-democratization-of-destruction/>; and Thomas G. Mahnken, "Weapons: The Growth & Spread of the Precision-Strike Regime," *Daedalus* 140, no. 3, Summer 2011. On patterns of diffusion in conventional precision-strike systems, see Michael C. Horowitz and Joshua A. Schwartz, "To Compete or Strategically Retreat? The Global Diffusion of Reconnaissance Strike," *Journal of Peace Research* 62, no. 4, July 2025.
- 7 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); and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Sources of Instability in the Second Nuclear Age: An American Perspective," in Lawrence Rubin and Adam Stulberg, eds., *The End of Strategic Stability? Nuclear Weapons and the Challenge of Regional Rivalries* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018).

fraught geopolitical environment, one that magnifies the inherent tradeoffs that come from competing against multiple rivals across multiple regions.⁸

Not surprisingly, then, Russia's repeated acts of aggression against its neighbors, North Korea's expanding nuclear arsenal, Iran's enduring status as a source of instability, and most importantly China's emergence as a military peer of the United States are prompting renewed debates over America's role in the world, including how Washington should assess, prioritize, and uphold its commitments. The upshot of these debates thus far has been a rebalance toward the Indo-Pacific, a renewed emphasis on great-power competition, and a heightened focus on China, especially for the Department of Defense.⁹

Beijing has been modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at an impressive pace over many years, aiming to deter Washington and its allies from intervening in a regional conflict, defeat them if deterrence fails, and eventually transform China into a world-class military power that equals or even surpasses the United States.¹⁰ It has been investing in new capabilities and devising new operational concepts to exploit vulnerabilities in the contemporary American way of war—vulnerabilities that include Washington's dependence on a relatively small number of land and sea bases to project air power, its aging and shrinking inventory of air and naval platforms, its fragile information networks, and a logistics infrastructure that might not be robust or resilient enough to sustain high-intensity operations in highly contested environments.¹¹

At the same time that China has been making expeditionary operations by the United States much more difficult, it has been enhancing its own expeditionary capabilities. Not only has it built the world's largest navy by hull count, but it has made significant strides toward developing the platforms and posture necessary for sustained global power projection. Finally, rather than neglecting its strategic forces while embarking on an ambitious conventional

8 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, 2017); and Hal Brands and Eric S. Edelman, *Avoiding a Grand Strategy of Bluff: The Crisis of American Military Primacy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

9 U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2018); and DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2022).

10 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: DIA, 2019); and Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2024).

11 Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., "The Pentagon's Wasting Assets," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4, July/August 2009; 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; 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); Thomas Shugart, *First Strike: China's Missile Threat to U.S. Bases in Asia* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2017); Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018); and Christopher M. Dougherty, *Why America Needs a New Way of War* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2019).

military modernization program, China is expanding and upgrading its nuclear arsenal as well, clearly no longer content with a minimum deterrent.¹²

Due to these changes, the military balance across the Indo-Pacific region and beyond looks much different than it did during the height of American primacy. In addition to facing several regional military powers spread across the world, all of which are dangerous but much less militarily capable than the United States, Washington also faces one genuine great power in the most economically dynamic part of the world.¹³ As the most recent National Defense Strategy Commission report noted, China is on track to become “a peer, if not a superior, of the United States across domains, a situation the United States has not faced since the height of the Cold War.”¹⁴ U.S. policymakers, therefore, have understandably labeled the PRC as the pacing threat that should most influence national strategy. Meanwhile, U.S. defense planners have come to regard a Chinese assault on Taiwan as the pacing scenario that should most influence U.S. force structure, posture, and design.¹⁵

On its face, the shift to focusing more on China amid these trends is neither surprising nor unsound. Simply put, there is no longer a serious question about China’s standing as a major military power, even if analysts remain uncertain about Beijing’s immediate intentions and question how the PLA would fare during its first significant combat operation in many decades. Nor is there need for a serious debate over whether to prioritize meeting the China challenge over managing other overseas threats, although what that means in practice and the broader implications of this strategic reorientation are often unclear. In the end, the PRC’s size, wealth, ambition, and military strength set it apart from any other U.S. rival.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to question the extent to which the United States can or should deprioritize other rivalries while confronting an emerging peer competitor. Russia may no longer be in the same league as China; North Korea is much less powerful than both; and Iran is weaker than all three, especially after the Israeli and American military operations against it. Yet these states continue to pose significant and, in some cases, growing threats to their regions. Moreover, recent events like the decision by U.S. officials to offer a security guarantee to Qatar and subsequent efforts to enhance security cooperation with Saudi Arabia—two partners in a region often highlighted as a natural candidate for U.S.

12 Evan Braden Montgomery and Toshi Yoshihara, “The Real Challenge of China’s Nuclear Modernization,” *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 4, 2022.

13 Jennifer Lind, “Back to Bipolarity: How China’s Rise Transformed the Balance of Power,” *International Security* 49, no. 2, 2024.

14 Jane Harman and Eric Edelman, *Commission on the National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2024), p. 6.

15 Ely Ratner, “Statement Before the 117th Congress, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate,” December 8, 2021, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821_Ratner_Testimony1.pdf; President Joseph R. Biden, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2022); DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy*; and Noah Robertson, “How DC Became Obsessed with a Potential 2027 Chinese Invasion of Taiwan,” *Defense News*, May 7, 2024.

retrenchment—serve as a reminder that Washington’s political commitments to counter those threats and preserve stability in those regions remain as sticky as ever.¹⁶

In addition, there is ample room to debate how the United States should manage the military dimensions of the China challenge, how it should deal with other rivals, and perhaps most consequentially how it can best reconcile these competing demands. Deterring Chinese aggression will only become more difficult—and defeating it will only become more costly—as the PLA’s capabilities continue to improve. The second-order consequences of the Sino-U.S. competition and a potential Sino-U.S. conflict will also become much more stark under these conditions. With an intensifying rivalry and the growing prospect of a protracted war against a military peer, the odds of opportunistic aggression by other rivals are likely to rise. As U.S. rivals escalate their military cooperation with one another, the chances of second-tier adversaries providing direct or indirect support to Washington’s pacing threat could increase sharply as well.

This report weighs in on these issues by making three main arguments. First, barring a radical shift in U.S. grand strategy, there are serious limits to how much the United States can deprioritize its secondary rivals, narrow its geographic focus, and concentrate on military competition against China within the first island chain that rings Northeast and Southeast Asia—all core objectives of the recently released *National Defense Strategy*.¹⁷ This is particularly true now that U.S. adversaries across the globe are cooperating more closely, which means the dangers they pose are increasingly interconnected. Despite an ongoing rebalance toward the Indo-Pacific, the return of great power competition, and a renewed effort to restore military advantages over the PRC, the United States still faces the prospect of military contingencies against different adversaries in regions that U.S. policymakers have traditionally identified as critical to U.S. national interests.¹⁸ Yet focusing

16 The White House, “Assuring the Security of the State of Qatar,” September 29, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/assuring-the-security-of-the-state-of-qatar/>; The White House, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Solidifies Economic and Defense Partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” November 18, 2025 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/11/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-solidifies-economic-and-defense-partnership-with-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>.

17 Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age of America* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2026).

18 Evan Braden Montgomery, *Reinforcing the Front Line: U.S. Defense Strategy and the Rise of China* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017); Evan Braden Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment: U.S. Grand Strategy, Maritime Power, and Military Options to Manage Decline,” *Foreign Security Studies* 29, no. 4, 2020; and Thomas G. Mahnken, “A Three-Theater Defense Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 5, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/usa/theater-defense-war-asia-europe-middle-east>. In recent decades, the multi-theater problem could be described more accurately and precisely as a three-theater problem involving East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. At present, however, the scope of American military concerns and commitments is even wider. The significant military buildup in U.S. Southern Command’s area of responsibility, recent operations against alleged narcotics traffickers, and a significant military operation against Venezuela all suggest that the United States currently confronts a four-theater problem, assuming it does not retrench elsewhere. Latin America is qualitatively different from East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, however, given the absence of a state-level threat on par with China, North Korea, Russia, or Iran.

more narrowly on the PRC in a multi-theater, multi-rival world creates openings for other rivals to challenge the status quo within their regions because they face fewer barriers to hostile behavior.

Just as concerning, an increased focus on China also incentivizes collaboration between those rivals across regions. Beijing, for example, may look for more opportunities to work with the likes of Russia, North Korea, and Iran in hopes that Washington will continue to diffuse its defense resources across the globe. Those states, in turn, may seek new ways to work with Beijing as it competes, clashes with, or recovers from a conflict with the United States, so Washington is compelled to concentrate its resources against its main rival. This dynamic puts U.S. policymakers in a double bind and creates a situation in which the failure to manage secondary rivals could magnify problems posed by the pacing threat.

Second, Washington's implicit approach to managing risks from all its rivals is becoming less sustainable. That approach rests on treating the PRC as a pacing threat and trying to achieve a rapid and decisive victory if deterrence fails and Beijing launches an invasion of Taiwan. If the United States can prevent a military fait accompli by quickly executing a lethal denial campaign against Chinese military and paramilitary forces, then it should still be well positioned to deal with other potential threats, especially if it can do so alongside allies and partners that are capable of playing a bigger military role than they might have in the past. As the Sino-American military balance continues to evolve and the prospects for a quick and clear-cut U.S. victory decrease, however, Washington not only will find itself in a worse position vis-à-vis Beijing, but it could also find itself losing ground to other adversaries.

Although a quick and convincing victory against China at acceptable costs might have been plausible at the peak of American military power, or perhaps even later if Washington had gotten an earlier start on seriously adapting the Joint Force to China's military modernization, those conditions no longer seem to exist—and it is questionable whether they might return. Instead, any conflict against the PRC is likely to be long and costly, especially a large-scale conventional conflict over the fate of Taiwan. Because Washington's capacity to hold secondary rivals in check turns in large part on its ability to handle the PRC, this could lead to the worst of both worlds: a situation in which U.S. forces might not be optimally designed and postured to deal with the China threat as it now is, yet are also suboptimized to deal with the other threats that remain. In other words, the United States may be getting China wrong—and if it gets China wrong, then it will get other threats wrong, too.

Third, to better compete with the PRC and manage global risks under these conditions, Washington should adapt its approach to deterring and potentially fighting Beijing by placing less stress on a denial campaign in defense of Taiwan and more emphasis on a punishment campaign in the context of a protracted conflict—that is, a campaign to degrade not just China's frontline military forces but also its military industrial capacity and economic power. Doing so would more accurately reflect the realities of great power war, reduce the possibility of a Pyrrhic victory in a clash over Taiwan or a similar scenario, and prioritize new ways of imposing costs on the PRC, both during peacetime and in conflict. It

would also emphasize the development of flexible combat capabilities—especially those with the global reach and fungibility to be employed across a variety of theaters and missions—that could be used to deter or, if necessary, fight secondary rivals alongside local allies and partners.

Rather than placing maximum emphasis on denial of a Taiwan invasion, Washington should embrace a strategy of *minimum essential denial and protracted punishment*. This would entail raising the costs of a Chinese assault on Taiwan without elevating the defense of Taiwan over the defeat of China, even if this comes at the price of putting the island in more immediate danger. It should involve preparing to inflict a variety of costs on the PRC over the course of a military campaign that might be longer and more geographically expansive than the short, sharp, force-on-force conflicts that military organizations often prefer. It should also preserve sufficient capabilities that can be used to impose costs on other adversaries if they engage in aggression.

The remainder of this report proceeds in three main chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the challenge of competing with multiple rivals at once and explains how the threat of opportunistic aggression is changing in ways that make this challenge even greater, due in large part to Washington's growing focus on the China problem. Chapter 3 explains how much of the U.S. defense policy community has attempted to square the circle of a one-major-war force with a multi-rival world by emphasizing rapid decisive battle against the pacing threat and why this approach is increasingly problematic. Finally, Chapter 4 outlines a revised approach to regional defense strategy and multi-theater deterrence, one that entails downgrading denial and elevating punishment, and reviews some of the key political and material implications of this alternative.

CHAPTER 2

China-centrism Versus Opportunistic Aggression

As a global power with global responsibilities, the United States has often confronted situations that have stressed its military resources and raised difficult questions about strategy, force planning, and prioritization. Even before the United States entered the Second World War, for example, U.S. officials had to grapple with the relative importance of fighting Germany on the European continent versus fighting Japan in maritime Asia. During the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, the United States was locked in a military rivalry that extended across multiple fronts; this led to recurring debates over where and how to implement containment. Soon after that competition came to an end, U.S. officials shifted their attention to managing several weaker powers that threatened their regions, but with the added wrinkle of doing so all at once. Today, Washington confronts a mix of state rivals—including dangerous minor powers like North Korea and Iran, an aggressive former great power in Russia, and an emerging military peer in China—which is creating new versions of old dilemmas.

These situations have influenced U.S. defense strategy and force planning in lasting ways.¹⁹ During the post–Cold War era, for example, the Pentagon embraced a two-war standard to hedge against the prospect of *opportunistic aggression*, a scenario in which one adversary might try to attack its neighbors while Washington was busy conducting military operations against another opponent. Given the number of rivals the United States now faces, not to mention their growing strength and ambition in several cases, the crux of recent defense

19 For overviews and assessments of U.S. force planning, see Mark Gunzinger, *Shaping America's Future Military: Toward a New Force Planning Construct* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013); Mark Gunzinger, Bryan Clark, David Johnson, and Jesse Sloman, *Force Planning for the Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017); and David O. Ochmanek, Peter A. Wilson, Brenna Allen, John Speed Meyers, and Carter C. Price, *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018).

policy debates has been whether Washington should abandon this two-war standard and adopt a more focused strategy that would elevate one rival above all others, along with a more narrow force planning construct that would size and shape the Joint Force primarily for a single major war rather than a pair of less taxing conflicts.

Indeed, this is precisely what the Department of Defense has done, at least in principle.²⁰ For more than a decade, but especially since publication of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, the Pentagon has gradually been turning away from treating simultaneous conflicts with second-tier powers as its lodestar. Instead, it has attempted to focus on the military challenges posed by its strongest rivals, China above all, and has emphasized a strategy of denial to address those challenges. From this perspective, the Joint Force should primarily be structured, postured, and prepared to stop the PLA and its paramilitary partners from seizing territory along the first island chain, most importantly the island of Taiwan. As the Donald J. Trump administration's recently released *National Security Strategy* confirmed, "detering a conflict over Taiwan, ideally by preserving military overmatch, is a priority."²¹

Proponents of China-centrism have continued to press their case since 2018, arguing the United States should double-down on competition with the PRC and avoid military entanglements elsewhere.²² Advocates of prioritization emphasize the magnitude of the China challenge, which only appears to be growing and which in their view merits a greater concentration of U.S. defense resources—even at the cost of withholding those resources from other theaters, deferring efforts to directly combat other threats, and accepting more risk when it comes to the possibility of opportunistic aggression by other rivals.

Some have pushed back on these arguments due to fears that prioritization could quickly go too far. Despite a general consensus that China is the most capable and most dangerous rival the United States faces, skeptics of China-centrism highlight the enduring importance of preparing for other threats, as well as the absence of clear alternatives to U.S. extended deterrence commitments. They also emphasize the potential costs of attempting

20 Jim Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 4, 2019.

21 Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2025), p. 23, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

22 Elbridge A. Colby, "America Must Face Reality and Prioritize China over Europe," *Financial Times*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/b423aa65-b9cb-4ba5-9c7d-f67dc289a18f>; Alexander Velez-Green and Robert Peters, *The Prioritization Imperative*, Special Report No. 288 (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, August 2024); Austin J. Dahmer, *Resourcing the Strategy of Denial* (Washington, DC: Marathon Initiative, February 2023); and Carlton Haelig, "To Focus on China, U.S. Needs to Wean Off Europe and Middle East Missions," *Breaking Defense*, October 28, 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/10/to-focus-on-china-us-needs-to-wean-off-europe-and-middle-east-missions/>. Calls for Washington to pull back from containing other rivals and husband its resources for a potential China fight have grown louder as military support to Ukraine and military operations in the Middle East have revealed or exacerbated shortfalls in critical resources like munitions of various types. Joseph Trevithick, "Conflicts 'Eating Into' Critical Munitions Stockpiles Needed for China Fight, Top U.S. Officer in Pacific Warns," *The War Zone*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.twz.com/air/conflicts-eating-into-critical-munitions-stockpiles-needed-for-china-fight-top-u-s-officer-in-pacific-warns>.

to reengage in critical regions if military retrenchment from Europe, the Korean Peninsula, or the Middle East is implemented but proves to be unwise.²³ For example, the two most recent iterations of the independent commission tasked with reviewing the national defense strategy have come out sharply against a narrow focus on China and a one-war standard. According to the 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission report, “given the presence of five serious adversaries, three with nuclear weapons, the United States must prepare—and resource—for multiple, near-simultaneous contingencies.”²⁴

These divergent views in the emerging debate over the future of U.S. defense revolve around a fundamental choice between concentration or diffusion of effort. On the one hand, the United States could direct much of its attention and most of its resources toward its strongest rival, the PRC, albeit at the potential cost of deterrence failure elsewhere if weaker rivals became emboldened by this strategic reorientation. On the other hand, the United States could divide its attention and resources to compete with all of its rivals, albeit at the potential cost of Chinese aggression if Beijing concluded that Washington’s lack of strategic adjustment indicated unwillingness or inability to uphold the status quo.

This chapter reviews the debate over whether and how the United States should manage multiple adversaries, identifies the dilemmas that emerge from trying to focus on just one of them, and argues the United States could find it increasingly difficult to downplay the risk of opportunistic aggression in service of competition with China. The growing China-centrism in U.S. defense strategy is likely to increase the risk of opportunistic aggression in ways that exacerbate the concentration-diffusion dilemma described above. Perhaps most troubling, rivals across the globe now have more incentive to put the United States in a double bind by engaging in cross-theater opportunism, which could leave Washington struggling to uphold its many commitments even more than it already does. Whereas the PRC may look for opportunities to work with other U.S. adversaries in hopes that Washington continues to diffuse its defense resources and spread itself thin, it is also possible that other U.S. rivals may find new ways to work with the PRC to force Washington to concentrate more and more of its resources on its main competitor. The prospect of this double bind will require the United States not only to be vigilant against independent local aggression by its rivals, especially if it is tied down fighting one adversary, but also to remain on guard against cooperative global opportunism: situations where one rival lends support to another to increase pressure and impose costs on Washington.

23 Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2, 2020.

24 Eric Edelman and Gary Roughead, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2018), p. 20.

Prioritization and the Pacing Threat

Juggling multiple rivalries across multiple regions has been a recurring theme in American strategy since at least the late 19th century, when the United States exited its “continental era” and entered a new “oceanic era.”²⁵ At that time, Washington transitioned from a regional power grappling mainly with security challenges on the North American landmass to a global power that wanted a battlefleet second to none, acquired overseas territories by force, and sent its troops to fight a major war in Europe. With increased power, enhanced status, and geographically expanded national interests, the United States also faced new security challenges.²⁶

During the interwar period, for example, Washington extensively planned for conflicts against different rivals and combinations of rivals that could block its growing global footprint, including the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan, the last of which was the subject of the famed War Plan Orange.²⁷ Then, after determining that Europe should be the priority theater over Asia as conflict spread across the world, it embarked on “the most extensive strategic offensives in history,” conducting two simultaneous and practically distinct major wars on both sides of the globe.²⁸ Throughout the Cold War, competition with the Soviet Union touched most regions in one form or another, especially by the 1980s, when the United States confronted a “three-front problem”: the need to defend against the possibility of Soviet military operations in Central Europe, in East Asia, and in the Persian Gulf.²⁹ Finally, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. policymakers turned their attention to smaller rivals in the Middle East and East Asia, and they became increasingly concerned with the simultaneity problem that would occur if the United States had to fight more than one of those rivals at the same time.

25 Samuel P. Huntington, “National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 80, no. 5, May 1954, p. 487.

26 On how the United States perceived and responded to these challenges, particularly through the lens of defense strategy (including the development of the interwar “color” plans and “rainbow” plans, the pre–World War II deliberation over the relative merits of fighting in Asia versus Europe, and eventually the wartime debate over the strengths and weaknesses of peripheral campaigns against Germany versus a direct clash against the Wehrmacht), see Thomas G. Mahnken, “U.S. Grand Strategy, 1939–1945,” in John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, vol. 1, *Fighting the War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

27 J. A. S. Grenville, “Diplomacy and War Plans in the United States, 1890–1917,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., vol. 11 (1961).

28 Eliot A. Cohen, “The Strategy of Innocence? The United States, 1920–1945,” in Williamson Murray, Alvin Bernstein, and MacGregor Knox, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 444. The rationale for prioritizing Europe over Asia was famously captured in the 1940 Plan Dog memorandum, authored by Chief of Naval Operations Harold Stark. On the memo and its significance, see Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

29 Robert W. Komer, “Maritime Strategy vs. Coalition Defense,” *Foreign Affairs* 60 no. 5, Summer 1982, pp. 1127–1128.

Many contemporary U.S. defense policy debates involve similar issues, such as determining the regions that matter most, the rivals that pose the greatest threats, the types of conflicts Washington should be prepared for, the number of wars it should be ready to fight, and the tradeoffs that might be necessary to achieve its most important objectives. These questions are particularly salient now that U.S. military advantages have eroded and the era of unchallenged American primacy has come to an end. The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* put the point bluntly: “For decades the United States has enjoyed uncontested or dominant superiority in every operating domain. We could generally deploy our forces when we wanted, assemble them where we wanted, and operate how we wanted. Today, every domain is contested—air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace.”³⁰

Perhaps the most important debate in recent years, or at least the one that has received the greatest attention, is whether changes in the security environment mean that the post–Cold War approach to planning for multiple large-scale conflicts should be abandoned—and, if so, what should replace it. For more than two decades, it was nearly axiomatic in U.S. defense policy circles that the Pentagon needed the military capabilities and capacity to win a pair of major conventional conflicts in overlapping timeframes. This guideline was established in the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War and upheld by successive defense reviews across several political administrations.³¹ As late as the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, for example, Pentagon authors stated plainly that the Department of Defense must adhere to “the potential requirement to conduct multiple concurrent operations, including large-scale combat operations, in disparate theaters.” Anything less, they went on, “would present the risk that the nation might be unable to defend important interests while its forces were undertaking a single large-scale operation,” and therefore “would increase the risk of aggression by other potential adversaries.”³²

Soon afterward, however, the Pentagon started to walk back from this longstanding benchmark. China’s military transformation and Russia’s revisionist aspirations, which had not been major causes for concern up to that point, were becoming more apparent and more worrisome. That raised the possibility of a clash with opponents that were much more powerful than the regional rivals that had been driving U.S. defense planning over the preceding decades. In addition, years of deferred modernization amid the demands of war in Afghanistan and Iraq; defense spending limits imposed by sequestration; and a series of high-profile cancellations to advanced weapon programs due to increasing costs, lack of technological maturity, or questionable relevance, all took a toll on U.S. combat

30 DoD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, p. 3.

31 Concerns about multiple wars against multiple adversaries were prevalent during the Cold War as well, particularly before the rapprochement between the United States and China. These led the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations to aim for a 2.5 war standard that would allow Washington to fend off a Soviet attack, fight China, and still have the capacity to conduct operations against a smaller power. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

32 DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2010), pp. 41–42.

power—especially when that combat power was increasingly being measured against a stronger set of rivals.

As a result, defense reviews in 2012 and 2014 toned down the two-war construct on paper, though not necessarily in a way that led to meaningful changes in policy, plans, or procurement.³³ Rather than explicitly or implicitly aiming to win a second war, the Pentagon was expected to “deny adversary objectives” or “impose unacceptable costs” on an opportunistic aggressor.³⁴ The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* went further and was widely credited (as well as criticized) for putting the final nail in the two-war construct coffin when it called for “defeating aggression by a major power” and “detering opportunistic aggression elsewhere.”³⁵ In sum, the two-regional-war floor that had underpinned defense planning was replaced with a one-major-war ceiling—a development that was cemented in the first Trump administration, but continued into the Joe Biden administration and beyond.³⁶

Proponents of this shift offer a straightforward argument: the rise of China, and to a lesser extent a more hostile Russia, has created a situation in which the Department of Defense can no longer afford to divide its attention and resources as much as it has in the recent past. Post–Cold War defense reviews had regional powers like North Korea, Iran, and Iraq foremost in mind when they established and reaffirmed the two-war standard. These comparatively weak rivals made the prospect of successfully engaging in simultaneous conflicts plausible, at least in theory. Today, by contrast, the United States faces hostile major powers, one of which is on pace to be a military peer. The ability to defeat two rivals at the same time or in close succession—either China and Russia both or one of those states alongside a regional power like North Korea or Iran—simply outstrips what the Joint Force can plausibly be expected to handle. Moreover, according to its critics, the two-war standard has another, deeper flaw under current circumstances. Not only does preparing to fight multiple rivals strain the Pentagon’s limited military capacity by spreading defense assets thin, but it also acts as a barrier to military innovation by privileging quantity over quality when it comes to military power.³⁷ In the end, therefore, the Department of Defense has little

33 Mitre, “Eulogy for the Two-War Construct,” p. 15.

34 DoD, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2012), p. 4; and DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2014), p. 22.

35 DoD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, p. 6. This is not the first time the United States has scaled back its defense strategy in response to rising threats and resource limitations. For instance, the Richard M. Nixon administration went from preparing to fight 2.5 wars to preparing to fight 1.5 wars. Whereas the U.S. military had organized itself to repulse simultaneous full-scale invasions by Warsaw Pact forces in Europe and Chinese forces in Asia, plus another minor contingency, rapprochement with China enabled it to prepare for only one major campaign at a time. Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American–Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1985), pp. 25–36.

36 Dan Lamothe, “In Japan, Top Biden Administration Officials Attempt to Set the Tone on China,” *Washington Post*, March 15, 2021; and Jim Garamone, “Official Talks DoD Role in Chinese Pacing Threat, Integrated Deterrence,” *DoD News*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2641068/official-talks-dod-policy-role-in-chinese-pacing-threat-integrated-deterrence/>.

37 Mitre, “Eulogy for the Two-War Construct”; and Gunzinger et al., *Force Planning*.

choice but to focus more narrowly on its pacing threat, the PRC, especially if the alternative is preserving a force that cannot be counted on to beat its main rival.

A Multi-rival, Multi-theater World

China is undoubtedly the strongest competitor the United States faces in terms of economic power and conventional military power, and perhaps eventually nuclear power as well. It is no surprise, therefore, that U.S. grand strategy has been gradually reorienting toward the PRC for more than a decade, albeit at a relatively modest pace and with mixed results, and that U.S. defense strategy has become more narrowly focused, mainly with the PRC in mind.³⁸ Nevertheless, China is not the only rival that continues to capture U.S. attention, nor is it necessarily the one most likely to instigate a crisis or conflict.

Russia, for instance, remains an “acute threat” in the language of the 2022 *National Defense Strategy*, one that “seeks to use force to impose border changes and to reimpose an imperial sphere of influence.”³⁹ In truth, the poor showing of Russian armed forces during their initial invasion of Ukraine seemed to indicate that the threat from Moscow—a threat that had received considerable attention in the years immediately leading up to that conflict given its conventional and nuclear military modernization efforts—had been overhyped.⁴⁰ Russia has also suffered enormous losses after four years of uninterrupted conflict.⁴¹ Yet its endurance over that time paints a more complex picture: one of an aggressive regime willing and able to sustain enormous losses and impose considerable pain in pursuit of its revisionist goals.

Russia has demonstrated an ability to adapt on the battlefield; it has built a defense industrial base that has outproduced most expectations; it has leveraged a network of international partners that continue to provide various forms of support; and it has gained enormous combat experience in a modern conflict involving heavy use of artillery, drones, and electronic warfare, albeit at great cost. Meanwhile, it also fields a large, diverse, and

38 Zack Cooper, “Rethinking the Rebalance,” Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, September 2025, <https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/IP25086.pdf>.

39 DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy*, p. 5. The 2026 National Defense Strategy, by contrast, refers to Russia as “a persistent but manageable threat to NATO’s eastern members.” Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, p. 10.

40 Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson, and Johan Norberg, “A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War,” *Survival* 64, no. 3, 2022; and Nahal Toosi and Lara Seligman, “The U.S. Overestimated Russia’s Military Might. Is it Underestimating China’s?” *Politico*, 15 June 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/15/china-military-00039786>.

41 Congressional Research Service, “Russian Military Performance and Outlook,” May 28, 2025, U.S. Naval Institute News, <https://news.usni.org/2025/05/29/report-to-congress-on-russian-military-performance>.

modernized nuclear arsenal.⁴² The combination of enduring grievances against NATO, an enormous military machine, limited sensitivity to costs, and a nuclear force that can threaten targets and backstop conventional operations makes Russia an enduring threat to stability in Europe.

Meanwhile, North Korea continues to be a persistent antagonist for Washington's two closest allies in East Asia, South Korea and Japan, as well as for the United States itself. Although Pyongyang has one of the world's largest armies, its unconventional and asymmetric capabilities have long been a far greater source of concern. These include conventional artillery forces that are trained on Seoul and could inflict significant damage on the city and surrounding areas, conventional missile forces that could strike civilian and military targets across the region, cyber warfare capabilities that could disrupt economic infrastructure and military information systems, special operations units that could be employed as instruments of sabotage and assassination, and chemical and biological weapons that could degrade military effectiveness and induce widespread panic.⁴³

North Korea is also on track to possess a large and diverse nuclear arsenal, one that it seems willing to use as a tool of intimidation and that serves as a safety net to deter reprisals when it engages in nonnuclear coercion.⁴⁴ Like Russia, therefore, North Korea can use a combination of traditional mass, niche military capabilities, and nuclear forces to put its opponents on the defensive.

Finally, Iran still poses threats to its neighbors, notwithstanding the domestic instability that has taken root under harsh authoritarianism, economic weakness that stems from decades of U.S.-led containment policies, and the damage inflicted on key sources of its

42 Katherine Kjellström Elgin, *More of the Same? The Future of the Russian Military and Its Ability to Change* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2024); Dara Massicot, *Russian Military Reconstitution: 2030 Pathways and Prospects* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024); Andrea Kendall-Taylor et al., *Assessing the Evolving Russian Nuclear Threat* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2023), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/assessing-the-evolving-russian-nuclear-threat>; and Sam Greene et al., *War Without End: Russia's Shadow Warfare*, Center for European Policy Analysis, 2025, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/war-without-end-russias-shadow-warfare/>.

43 DIA, *North Korea Military Power: A Growing Regional and Global Threat* (Washington, DC: DIA, 2021), <https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/NKMP.pdf>; and James Hackett, *The Conventional Military Balance on the Korean Peninsula* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018).

44 Mary Beth D. Nikitin, *North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2025), pp. 19–27; National Intelligence Council, “North Korea: Scenarios for Leveraging Nuclear Weapons Through 2030,” NIE 2023-00262-B, January 2023, declassified on June 15, 2023, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Declassified-NIE-North-Korea-Scenarios-For-Leveraging-Nuclear-Weapons-June2023.pdf>.

military power by recent Israeli and American military operations.⁴⁵ Tehran's cultivation of proxy forces, its increasingly accurate conventional strike systems, and its nuclear program have cast a shadow over the Middle East and consumed much of Washington's attention in the post–Cold War era. Rebuilding these sources of strength will undoubtedly lead to renewed threats against its neighbors, but preventing Iran from restocking and employing its coercive tool kit could require costly efforts at containment. In addition, Tehran's regular and irregular maritime capabilities, including missiles and mines, still present a danger to freedom of navigation in the region—a coercive lever it has not been willing to pull, at least in the Persian Gulf where this danger ostensibly is most severe, but one that the United States, its allies, and its partners have not been able to discount.⁴⁶

Not surprisingly, the demands of ongoing competition with Russia, North Korea, and Iran have made serious prioritization difficult. Even the current Trump administration, which seems willing to break from precedent and embrace prioritization, has found it difficult. Although the president and senior officials have made a point of criticizing legacy U.S. security commitments and past American military interventions, many of the changes in strategy and policy they advocate remain aspirational, at least for the time being.

For instance, the United States remains deeply engaged in Europe, notwithstanding frequent criticism that Washington has been insufficiently supportive of Kiev, the ongoing dispute over President Trump's aspirations to control Greenland, and reports that U.S. policy-makers want European NATO members to play the lead role when it comes to conventional deterrence of Russia as soon as 2027.⁴⁷ It has not yet reduced its footprint on the Korean Peninsula, where it stands shoulder to shoulder with South Korea in the face of North Korean provocations and would still retain command of combined forces in the event of

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- 45 The strikes on Iran in summer 2025 and the degradation of Iranian proxy forces and air defenses after the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks may have a lasting impact on Iran's capabilities and strategy. See Clayton Thomas, *Iran: Background and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2025), pp. 4–8; and Vivian Yee, “How Tough is Iran? A String of Military Losses Raises Questions,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2025. For assessments on the future of the Iranian threat, see Suzanne Maloney, “Iran's Dangerous Desperation,” *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 5, September/October 2025; and Narges Bajoghli, “The Generation Iranian Hard-Liners Have Been Waiting For,” *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/07/29/generation-iran-regime-ideology-israel-strikes/>.
- 46 On Iranian conventional strike capabilities, see Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025), p. 22; and Michael Kurilla, “Posture Statement of the United States Central Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” U.S. Central Command, March 7, 2024. See also Daniel M. Gettinger and Clayton Thomas, *Iran's Ballistic Missile Programs: Background and Context* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2025); Missile Threat, “Missiles of Iran,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, updated August 10, 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/>; and International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Open-Source Analysis of Iran's Missile and UAV Capabilities and Proliferation* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021), <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2021/04/iran-missiles-uavs-proliferation/>. On the Iranian naval threat, see U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence, *Iranian Naval Forces: A Tale of Two Navies* (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, 2017).
- 47 Gram Slattery and Humeyra Pamuk, “U.S. Sets 2027 Deadline for Europe-Led NATO Defense, Officials Say,” *Reuters*, December 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-sets-2027-deadline-europe-led-nato-defense-officials-say-2025-12-05/>.

conflict, despite reports that it has considered withdrawing thousands of troops.⁴⁸ It has also maintained or increased military activities across the Middle East, the region that is most often described as ripe for retrenchment. These include targeting Houthi forces that have threatened maritime commercial traffic in the Red Sea, targeting nonstate actors in Syria in retaliation for attacks against U.S. military personnel, defending Israel from Iranian drone and missile attacks, and conducting air operations against Tehran’s nuclear program.

To be sure, the recently released *National Defense Strategy* called for European allies, South Korea, and Middle Eastern partners to take much greater responsibility for their own security, potentially presaging a pullback from theaters where they are located to concentrate on the Western Hemisphere and Western Pacific. But recent events abroad, not to mention political opposition at home, raise doubts that those objectives will be implemented, at least to the degree that the administration might hope.⁴⁹

Compounding these barriers to strategic reorientation toward the Western Pacific and China, Washington has escalated its deployment and employment of U.S. armed forces in Latin America, which has long been treated as an economy of force theater that requires a modest military presence. Indeed, it has for the moment elevated hemispheric defense from a relatively low-priority objective more often associated with U.S. strategy in the early decades of the 20th century to a top-tier objective at the quarter mark of the 21st.⁵⁰ It remains to be seen whether this recent emphasis will become additive to other security commitments that have traditionally received more attention and resources, or whether instead it represents the first major step toward a broader strategic adjustment.

In either case, though, the same underlying dilemma persists. Despite ongoing efforts to elevate competition with China and improve a regional military balance that has become increasingly favorable to Beijing, the United States still confronts a global multi-theater problem: the prospect of major military contingencies with different adversaries in the regions that U.S. policymakers have long deemed critical to U.S. interests.⁵¹ That problem, moreover, makes Washington vulnerable to opportunistic aggression, insofar as U.S. military operations against one rival could open a window of opportunity for revisionism by another rival.

Historically, opportunistic aggression has been a common concern among great powers, whether continental powers that feared multi-front wars against their immediate neighbors or maritime powers whose far-flung interests raised the possibility of concurrent conflicts

48 Nancy A. Youssef, Alexander Ward, and Timothy W. Martin, “U.S. Considers Withdrawing Thousands of Troops from South Korea,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2025.

49 Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*.

50 Trump, *National Security Strategy*, pp. 15–17.

51 Montgomery, *Reinforcing the Front Line*; Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment”; and Mahnken, “A Three-Theater Defense Strategy.”

in distant locales.⁵² Although these concerns have sometimes been exaggerated, which can make them easy for skeptics to dismiss, they are still well grounded.⁵³ Intuitively, deterrence should be more difficult to sustain vis-à-vis one rival when a state is devoting its attention to and expending its resources in a fight with another rival, given the likely drain on its resolve to respond to other threats and its ability to react to them.⁵⁴

Opportunistic aggression has indeed been a genuine threat, therefore, and has manifested in many different forms over time.⁵⁵ The biggest concern for the United States in recent decades has been the prospect of an opportunist expanding in its own region while Washington fought elsewhere. But similar opportunism can manifest in less dramatic ways: as an effort to distract a state that is already in crisis or conflict so it cannot devote its full attention to the war at hand; as indirect military intervention to bleed that state by making its initial war longer and harder; or as a military buildup that shifts the balance of power while the target of opportunism is consumed by war or rebuilding in the aftermath of one, not unlike what China has done by modernizing its military while the United States was consumed by the global war on terror.

How should opportunism influence contemporary U.S. strategy? So long as Washington is competing with multiple rivals across multiple regions, it will need to contend with the prospect of independent, uncoordinated, and local forms of opportunistic aggression. If the United States and its NATO allies find themselves fighting against Russia in Europe, for example, either China or North Korea might see an opening to challenge the status quo more assertively in East Asia, given that both could reasonably expect to face less resistance. Alternatively, if Washington and Beijing do come to blows, Russia or Iran could take advantage of the situation to ramp up threats against their neighbors because they anticipate fewer immediate consequences.

These possibilities cannot be easily dismissed. A critical issue for U.S. policymakers, however, is what an increasingly China-centric strategy, along with a one-major-war force, mean for the likelihood and character of opportunistic aggression. As described in the next section, not only are there reasons to expect that the risks of opportunism will become

52 William R. Thompson, "Why Rivalries Matter and What Great Power Rivalries Tell Us About World Politics," in William R. Thompson, ed., *Great Power Rivalries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), p. 12; and Aaron Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

53 On the logic, history, and contemporary risk of opportunistic aggression, see Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Opportunistic Aggression in the Twenty-First Century," *Survival* 62, no. 4, 2020.

54 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1988). See also Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 4; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State back in," *International Security* 19, No. 1, Summer 1994; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), pp. 154–155; and Douglas B. Atkinson, Joshua Jackson, and George W. Williford, "Rivalry, Uncertainty, and Militarized Compellent Threats," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 1, March 2021.

55 Brands and Montgomery, "Opportunistic Aggression in the Twenty-First Century."

more pronounced under these conditions, but there are also reasons to anticipate that opportunism could become less isolated, more interconnected, and much more directly intertwined with the China problem than separate from it.

The Emerging Double Bind

To date, the United States in general and the Pentagon in particular have found it difficult to implement a significant strategic adjustment and embrace more selective global engagement. Looking to the near future, the headwinds buffeting this type of change could become even stronger. Not only does the United States continue to face legacy demands imposed by long-standing rivalries, most important among these protecting allies and partners until they are ready to play a more independent role in providing security for their own regions, but it also must contend with the changing dynamics of opportunistic aggression.

The growth of Chinese power, combined with the trend toward China-centrism, is likely to make opportunism more complex and potentially more dangerous for two main reasons. The first, and most straightforward, is that concentrating on one rival will provide more freedom of action to other rivals. Unless the United States significantly scales back its commitments, or until its allies and partners significantly increase their capacity to manage regional threats on their own, the risks of local opportunism could grow. By clarifying its priorities and acknowledging the limits of its military capabilities, Washington may avoid a “strategy of bluff” and incentivize allies to shoulder more responsibilities, but this also sends a message that it could be extremely risk averse when dealing with threats other than those posed by the PRC.⁵⁶ As a result, other rivals might conclude that Washington would not be willing to jeopardize its most critical military assets in a conflict against them, which could give them more latitude to pursue acts of aggression in their regions.

The logic underpinning this possibility has historical precedent. More than a century ago, late-imperial Germany mounted a major challenge to British naval supremacy, not by setting out to match the Royal Navy ship for ship but rather by trying to build a battle fleet big enough to give London pause and deter it from military intervention in Europe. Its argument was that if the Imperial German Navy could credibly threaten to inflict enough damage on the Royal Navy to render the United Kingdom vulnerable to other competitors like France and Russia, London would be hesitant to put its forces at risk and more willing to grant Berlin a free hand on the continent.⁵⁷ Great Britain managed to outmaneuver Germany and undercut its strategy, in part through adept diplomacy that neutralized those other rivals. Even so, contemporary U.S. competitors might come to a similar conclusion, especially

56 Hal Brands and Eric S. Edelman, *A Strategy of Bluff: The Crisis of American Military Primacy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

57 Paul S. Kennedy, “Strategic Aspects of the Anglo-German Naval Race,” in Paul S. Kennedy, ed., *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 129–160; and Paul S. Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), pp. 418–430.

as the military demands of countering China increase and calls for the United States to husband its military resources become louder.

Of course, Washington can always opt to accept greater risk vis-à-vis secondary theaters and rivals if it concludes that competition with Beijing requires that tradeoff. Yet this decision would run headlong into a second problem: A China-centric strategy provides U.S. adversaries with a strong motive to work with one another. Opportunism is not always an independent threat; rather, it can also be a coordinated or collaborative effort among two states to impose costs on a mutual rival. These forms of opportunism are increasingly relevant in the current environment. The 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, for example, noted that the United States and its allies should “be prepared for the possibility that one or more potential opponents might act together in a coordinated or opportunistic fashion across multiple theaters.”⁵⁸ Yet it did not address how this risk is changing and or describe the strategic consequences of increased adversary collaboration. Not only does the PRC have growing incentives to support other U.S. rivals in ways that would make them more difficult to ignore, but other U.S. rivals also have growing incentives to support the PRC in ways that would make it harder to contain. The double bind that results from this type of cross-theater opportunism exacerbates the inherent challenges associated with juggling multiple rivals and trying to prioritize among them.

Indeed, the PRC stands to benefit by aiding U.S. rivals in ways that would intensify the threats they pose to their regions, undermine efforts by local states to contain or counter those threats on their own, and therefore make retrenchment by the United States (and reconcentration against China) even costlier and more controversial. In peacetime, that could entail providing arms, intelligence, and training that improve the capabilities of second-tier U.S. rivals. If Washington faltered in its China focus, moreover, and engaged in significant military operations against other rivals, Beijing would have incentives to assist the targets of those operations in ways that would enable them to hold out longer, fight harder, and ultimately drain the United States of resources that could otherwise be used against it in the future—a dynamic the United States has fallen prey to in the past, for instance during the Vietnam War. China could also help other U.S. rivals reconstitute their forces after a fight, ensuring that they would remain a thorn in Washington’s side.

Meanwhile, other rivals have reasons to help the PRC as they can, mainly to ensure that the China problem continues to demand the bulk of U.S. attention and resources—and perhaps to enable Beijing to impose as many costs on Washington as possible in the event of a conflict. During a Sino-American crisis, for example, they could attempt to distract the United States with various provocations, potentially causing Washington to keep in reserve more forces than it otherwise would, putting it at a military disadvantage vis-à-vis Beijing. In a Sino-American conflict, they might provide direct support to China, including military equipment to backfill losses suffered during a long fight. After a war, they could help

58 Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, p. 13.

the PRC reconstitute some of its military capabilities to keep the Sino-U.S. competition at a high level.⁵⁹

The bottom line is that a narrow focus on one rival while other rivalries persist creates a compelling logic for those states to work with one another. That logic is increasingly difficult to dismiss, moreover, given the patterns of cooperation among U.S. adversaries that have emerged over the past several years.⁶⁰ Just as Washington has been turning more of its attention toward Beijing, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and China have been supporting each other in ways that skeptics of greater alignment between U.S. adversaries have long thought unlikely.⁶¹ Iran, North Korea, and China are providing weapons, personnel, and dual-use supplies to Russia, enabling it to sustain its war against Ukraine. China and Russia are collaborating on early warning systems, submarines, and helicopters. Moscow is even helping Beijing develop specialized forces that could play an important role in an invasion of Taiwan.

These developments far exceed the modest levels of military cooperation that had been observed previously, notwithstanding a long history of arms sales, military exercises, and grand proclamations about solidarity that, in the past, seemed more flash than substance. They also mean that the risk of opportunistic aggression is no longer separate from the China problem but rather could magnify it. If rivals like Russia, North Korea, and Iran have more ability to engage in aggression because the United States is trying to focus more narrowly on China, and they also have more incentive to aid China so the Sino-American competition is even more taxing for Washington, then managing these rivalries as though they are entirely distinct becomes much less tenable.

59 For discussions of the likelihood and character of some of these scenarios, see David R. Stone, “Russia’s Potential Role in a Protracted War with China,” in Joshua Arostegui, ed., *The 2024 Carlisle Conference on the PLA: Protracted War Against the PRC* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2026); Markus Garlauskas, “Assessing North Korea’s Role in a Protracted Sino-American War,” in Arostegui, ed., *2024 Carlisle Conference*; and Brian G. Carlson, “China’s Views of Potential Support from Russia in Protracted War,” in Arostegui, ed., *2024 Carlisle Conference*.

60 Bonny Lin et al., “CRINK Security Ties: Growing Cooperation, Anchored by China and Russia,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 30, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/crink-security-ties-growing-cooperation-anchored-china-and-russia>.

61 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment*, pp. 29–30.

CHAPTER 3

Denial, Decisive Battle, and Multi-theater Deterrence

Opportunistic aggression remains a significant challenge for U.S. officials who are trying to contend with China's growing military power. Making matters worse, efforts to focus more narrowly on the PRC not only create openings for other rivals to challenge the status quo within their regions but also create incentives for more collaboration between those rivals across regions. Beijing may look for opportunities to work with Russia, North Korea, Iran, and perhaps others in hopes that Washington will continue to diffuse its defense resources and spread itself thin, and those states may seek new ways to work with Beijing so Washington needs to concentrate even more of its resources on its main competitor. Barring a fundamental shift in grand strategy, U.S. officials face a tall order: improve the position of the United States relative to China without overconcentrating resources and opening the door to aggression by other rivals, deal with other rivals without diluting the resources needed to prevent or stop aggression by China, and achieve all this while actors hostile to the United States are cooperating more and more closely.⁶²

Washington could pursue a variety of approaches to try and meet these demands. For instance, it could spend far more money on defense to increase its total military capacity and close the Lippmann gap that occurs when resources are insufficient to meet commitments.⁶³ It could lean on nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear use, not simply to get more bang for the buck but to deter aggression in some theaters so it can bolster its conventional

⁶² A genuine change in grand strategy, rather than a modest effort at reprioritization, would see Washington retrench from secondary theaters in a meaningful way and accept the instability that might follow. That path appears far from certain, however, given that the current U.S. administration, which initially seemed more amenable to selective retrenchment than its predecessors, has not gone down this road and in some cases has actually escalated U.S. military engagement in regions other than the Indo-Pacific.

⁶³ Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943), pp. 7–8; and Samuel P. Huntington, "Coping with the Lippmann Gap," *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 3, 1987, pp. 453–477.

military power in others.⁶⁴ It could use diplomacy to deescalate rivalries, sideline some rivals, and drive wedges between others so it confronts fewer potential opponents at once and erodes ties between the ones that remain.⁶⁵ It could engage in burden sharing by relying more on allies and partners to provide for their own security and the security of their home regions. Or it could combine these measures in various ways.

Unfortunately, most of these options are problematic, at least over the near-to-medium term.⁶⁶ For instance, although U.S. defense spending has generally been on an upward trajectory over the past decade (and President Trump has recently called for a roughly 50 percent increase beyond the current budget), sustained growth at a scale sufficient to close the Lippmann gap may not be feasible over the next decade, especially given a political climate in which partisan gridlock is real and persistent.⁶⁷ The U.S. nuclear arsenal is still heavily weighted toward high-yield strategic weapons, a legacy of post-Cold War draw-downs and longstanding efforts to reduce Washington's reliance on nuclear forces. This means the United States might not have the types of nuclear capabilities it would need to deter the types of aggression that would normally merit a conventional military response.⁶⁸ Negotiations often hold the promise of reducing tensions and perhaps even transforming antagonistic relationships, but the conditions that would be most conducive to bringing rivalries to an end—a common competitor that would make it imperative for the United States and one or more of its adversaries to set their own disputes aside, along with a

64 The Biden administration's Nuclear Posture Review hinted at the possibility of relying more on nuclear weapons to manage the threat of opportunistic aggression, although it did not address potential credibility and capability gaps that might make this approach problematic. DoD, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2022), p. 12.

65 Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security* 35, no. 4, Spring 2011.

66 Brands and Montgomery, "One War Is Not Enough."

67 On the continuing upward drift in defense spending, as well as how different funding mechanisms influence the scale and effectiveness of that spending, see Travis Sharp, *Unstable Equilibrium: Analysis of the 2026 Defense Budget Request* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2025). A recent CSBA report estimated that 2 percent real annual growth in defense spending would be necessary to meet the challenge posed by China, and the National Defense Strategy Commission has recommended 3–5 percent annual growth to meet U.S. security commitments more broadly. See, respectively, Travis Sharp, Casey Nicastro, and Evan Montgomery, *Relook Playbook: Defense Budgeting Insights from a CSBA Rebalancing Exercise* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2025), p. 29; and Edelman and Roughead, *Providing for the Common Defense*, p. 52.

68 Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The Nukes We Need: Preserving the American Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 6, November/December 2009; 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).

willingness on the part of the United States to make significant concessions to its adversaries—are largely absent.⁶⁹

Finally, allies and partners seem to have received the message that they will need to shoulder more responsibilities, and they are in many cases increasing their own defense expenditures. This is certainly promising given that the current administration is placing considerable emphasis on the notion that more capable allies and partners can help solve the problem of opportunistic aggression. As the 2026 *National Defense Strategy* argued, “If our allies and partners invest properly in their defenses...together we can generate more than enough forces to deter potential opponents, including if they act concurrently.”⁷⁰ But even in the most optimistic scenarios, it will take time for them to build the military capabilities necessary to reduce their dependence on the United States, train for new missions, and overcome coordination problems among themselves.

As the United States attempts to manage a set of increasingly complex risks across regions and rivals, therefore, it must look first to its conventional military capabilities. Implicitly, at least, this is what the Pentagon seems to be doing. To square the circle of a one-major-war force in a multi-theater, multi-rival world, it has embraced a “pacing-threat / lesser-included-case” approach to strategy, planning, and investments. That approach is built on the belief that developing the ability to deter or defeat the strongest threat (China) in the most challenging scenario (an invasion of Taiwan) will also yield the ability to deter or defeat most other challengers in most other plausible contingencies. In other words, if the United States can stop a Chinese assault on Taiwan, then it should be well positioned to handle aggression elsewhere and keep potential opportunists in check.⁷¹

This logic has an understandable appeal. After all, focusing on the most serious rivals and the most taxing scenarios should enhance military effectiveness by putting the hardest operational problems front and center. Applying similar approaches to different adversaries also should enhance military efficiency by simplifying acquisition, planning, and training. The downside, however, is that this approach rests on a set of assumptions that is increasingly difficult to sustain, especially given the scenario at the center of U.S. strategy—assumptions about sequencing of events, speed of action, and scale of victory. Simply put, for a pacing-threat / lesser-included-case approach to succeed not only when it comes to dealing with

69 For skeptical takes on wedge strategies in the current environment, see Sergey Radchenko, “Driving a Wedge Between China and Russia Won’t Work,” *War on the Rocks*, August 24, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/driving-a-wedge-between-china-and-russia-wont-work/>; and Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, *No Limits? The China–Russia Relationship and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), p. 29.

70 Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, pp. 13–14.

71 On the pacing-threat / lesser-included-case approach, see Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment”; and Evan Montgomery, “Defense Strategy and the Empire State of Mind: How Preparing for the Best Can Leave Washington Vulnerable to the Rest,” *War on the Rocks*, February 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/defense-strategy-and-the-empire-state-of-mind-how-preparing-for-the-best-can-leave-washington-vulnerable-to-the-rest/>.

China but also as a solution to the problem of opportunistic aggression, the United States would need the ability to achieve an early, rapid, and decisive victory in a clash with the PRC—or it would need to convince its rivals that it has that ability.

If Washington puts itself in a position to fight China first, fight it fast, and finish with a clear-cut victory, then its current approach to defense strategy, as well as the force design that goes along with it, is a bet that would pay off. By winning quickly and convincingly in a fight with its pacing threat, the United States probably could continue to deter or, if necessary, respond to other threats. In this case, secondary rivals that might be tempted toward opportunism would not have a wide-open window to challenge the status quo by force, either while the United States was tied down in a conflict with China or recovering from one. If those conditions do not hold, however, then Washington would put itself in a precarious situation relative to all its rivals. A major conflict with a second-tier adversary in advance of a potential clash with China could seriously reduce its ability to defend Taiwan, and a conflict over Taiwan that was longer and more costly than anticipated could seriously weaken Washington’s ability to handle challenges that arise in other theaters. Unfortunately, real-world events offer a constant reminder that secondary rivals often distract the United States from its chief priorities. And all indications are that a long, hard fight is precisely what would occur if war broke out over Taiwan.

The remainder of this chapter reviews the current U.S. focus on the defense of Taiwan and the current U.S. preference for a strategy of denial to shield the island from Chinese aggression. It then explains why denial is often viewed as synonymous with decisive battle and how decisive battle has become the default approach to managing global risks in a multi-theater, multi-rival world. Finally, it outlines the assumptions that are necessary to make this logic work and explains why they are increasingly problematic.

Strategy and the Pacing Scenario

When policymakers and planners confront multiple, geographically dispersed rivals, there are two basic approaches that can guide how they develop their defense strategies and shape their conventional forces: specialization and generalization. The first option entails using different capabilities to deal with different threats.⁷² For example, the United States could specialize across military services by relying mostly on land forces to deter or fight rivals located in theaters like Europe or the Korean Peninsula, while its aerospace and maritime forces would take the lead in deterring or fighting rivals like China and Iran, against whom infantry and armored forces would have comparatively little role to play.⁷³ It could also specialize within services by devoting certain components of its land, aerospace, and

72 Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment.”

73 See, for example, Andrew R. Hoehn, et al., *A New Division of Labor: Meeting America’s Security Challenges Beyond Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007).

maritime power to different theaters and different threats.⁷⁴ This bespoke approach to defense has advantages, at least in certain circumstances, but decades of jointness, the complex and multi-domain character of contemporary military operations, and the reluctance of entire services as well as individual warfighting communities to be pigeonholed all work against specialization as a guiding principle.

The second option is to rely on the same capabilities to deal with different threats. Policymakers and planners often embrace one version of this theory: the pacing-threat / lesser-included-case construct. This assumes that a force capable of dealing with the former should be more than sufficient to manage the latter. Although not without its problems, this approach reflects a fundamental reality: The ability to compete with secondary rivals will be profoundly shaped by the defense strategy, operational concepts, military forces, and posture a state adopts to manage its most capable rival. In other words, how Washington prepares for China—and how effective those efforts are expected to be—will establish the boundaries for what is and is not possible when preparing for other threats. Any strategy to deal with the PRC and strategies to deal with other rivals are unavoidably intertwined, therefore, even if the connections between them are often implicit.

At present, the United States has elected to focus not only on a pacing threat, China, but also on a pacing scenario, an invasion of Taiwan.⁷⁵ The importance of Taiwan as a potential target of Chinese military aggression is readily apparent. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders have held out reunification as one of their chief objectives ever since the island became a refuge for the Kuomintang at the end of the civil war. Beyond its historical significance, Taiwan has considerable economic value as a technology hub and center of innovation; it has symbolic value as an uncomfortable reminder for the CCP that its brand of nondemocratic governance is not as necessary as it claims; and it has strategic value as a key link in the first island chain that rings China's maritime periphery, blocks its unfettered access to the Western Pacific, and stands between the PRC and Japan's southwest islands.⁷⁶ Until recently, however, the cross-Strait military balance made the prospects of a successful invasion dim. Generations of CCP leaders have therefore been willing to pursue reunification slowly and via means other than a massive brute force assault. Given the current leadership's commitment to national rejuvenation, however, not to mention the transformation of

74 For an example applied to naval forces, see Montgomery, "Primacy and Punishment." For an example applied to ground forces, see Andrew F. Krepinevich, *An Army at the Crossroads* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2008).

75 Ratner, "Statement Before the 117th Congress."

76 On the potential economic, military, and political ramifications of Chinese control over Taiwan, see the essays in David Santoro and Ralph Cossa, eds., *The World After Taiwan's Fall* (Honolulu: The Pacific Forum, 2023). The military value of Taiwan to China and how its loss would influence the regional military balance have recently been a topic of contention. For alternative views, see Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *International Security* 47, no. 1, Summer 2022; and Jonathan Caverly, "So What? Reassessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 3, Summer 2025.

the cross-Strait military balance, its willingness to tolerate Taiwan’s de facto independence might not last indefinitely.

If ruling Taiwan is the CCP’s aim, launching an invasion to seize the island, remove Taipei’s democratically elected leaders, and shatter any local resistance is often presumed to be its most likely path to achieving it—one that President Xi has directed the PLA to be capable of executing by 2027.⁷⁷ Although Beijing could employ a variety of methods to try and secure control of Taiwan, from political subversion at one extreme to nuclear coercion at the other, there is a widespread belief that invasion is the option it would choose.⁷⁸ Overwhelming the island with brute force is the only certain road to victory, or so the argument goes. Alternatives to invasion would leave too much to chance. According to one chief proponent of this view, “Conquering another state is a much more efficient and reliable method of subordination than trying to persuade it to give up its freedom. Why bother with persuasion if you can get what you want more reliably and decisively by direct assault?”⁷⁹ As an added bonus for Beijing, if it executed a military fait accompli against Taiwan—that is, if it conducted an invasion before the United States could mount a significant intervention, consolidated its gains on the island, and deterred or fended off any attempt to dislodge PLA forces—then it would also erode U.S. alliances in the region and clear the way to Chinese local hegemony.⁸⁰

This contingency has clearly been a key driver of China’s military modernization efforts.⁸¹ Those efforts have included building the tools necessary to project force against the island and fielding the weapons needed to suppress or degrade outside forces that might intervene

77 Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, “CIA Chief Warns Against Underestimating Xi’s Ambitions Toward Taiwan,” *Reuters*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-chief-says-chinas-xi-little-sobered-by-ukraine-war-2023-02-02/>; and Brad Dress, “China Will Be Ready for Potential Taiwan Invasion by 2027, U.S. Admiral Warns,” *The Hill*, March 21, 2024, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4547637-china-potential-taiwan-invasion-2027-us-admiral-warns/>.

78 There is, of course, some skepticism about whether China would actually opt for invasion given the likely costs of that campaign. See, for example, David Sacks, “Why China Would Struggle to Invade Taiwan,” Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/article/why-china-would-struggle-invade-taiwan>; and Dan Grazier, James Siebens, and Mackenna Rawlins, *Rethinking the Threat: Why China Is Unlikely to Invade Taiwan* (Washington, DC: The Stimson Center, 2025). For a skeptical take on the invasion threat that outlines a coercive alternative to brute force assault, one that might become more appealing to Chinese leaders and thus a more plausible risk to Taiwanese independence, see Evan Braden Montgomery and Toshi Yoshihara, “Conquering Taiwan by Other Means: China’s Expanding Coercive Options,” *The Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 1, Spring 2025.

79 Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 130. For similar views, see Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022); and Dmitri Alperovitch with Garrett M. Graff, *World on the Brink: How America Can Beat China in the Race for the 21st Century* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2024).

80 Colby, *Strategy of Denial*, p. 145. This type of military strategy—which is generally characterized by a surprise offensive, the seizure of inadequately protected territory, and then reinforcement and defense of that territory—has also been referred to as a “limited aims” strategy. John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 53–56.

81 DoD, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2025* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2025), p. 10.

in its defense. For instance, Beijing has produced a diverse suite of anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) capabilities that could target U.S. and allied forces operating in the region, notably the PRC's inventory of increasingly numerous, increasingly accurate, and increasingly long-range surface-to-air, surface-to-surface, air-to-air, and anti-ship missiles.⁸² It has also been developing the amphibious forces necessary to conduct maritime power projection operations.⁸³

In an invasion scenario, the main American concern is that these capabilities would be employed in tandem: A2/AD assets would hold at risk or strike U.S. forces in theater, in addition to blocking reinforcements from coming to Taiwan's aid, while amphibious units (along with other military assets attempting to seize local command of the air, the seas, and other domains) would spearhead an assault on the island and establish control of the surrounding area. There is, however, another reason why the Pentagon has been treating an invasion of Taiwan as its pacing scenario: the belief that if it can prevent China from executing a military *fait accompli*, it can handle most other threats that come its way.

The Logic and Limits of Denial

How would the United States attempt to deal with this contingency if it occurred, assuming U.S. leaders determine that Chinese aggression must be actively and directly opposed? The most plausible answer based on publicly available information is that it would seek to prevent a military *fait accompli* by quickly implementing a denial campaign against Chinese military and paramilitary forces.⁸⁴ Two reasons best explain why policymakers and planners have gravitated toward this approach, beyond the common conviction that denial is “self-evidently the most credible way to convince an adversary not to challenge one's interest.”⁸⁵

The first and most important reason is to keep Taiwan out of the PRC's hands, which only some defense strategies would aim to do. In general, three broad defense options are available to a state looking to uphold the status quo; these options seek to deter aggression in very

82 *Anti-access* refers to impeding the arrival of opposing forces into a theater (for instance, by attacking expeditionary units on their way to the region or the local facilities that would receive them), whereas *area denial* refers to inhibiting their freedom of maneuver while they are conducting operations (for example, by disrupting their ability to communicate or establishing defensive barriers they would need to penetrate before reaching potential targets). Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Rober Work, *Meeting the A2/AD Challenge* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003), pp. 4–5.

83 Conor M. Kennedy and Daniel Caldwell, “The Type 075 LHD: Development, Missions, and Capabilities,” *China Maritime Report No. 23* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, October 2022), p. 7; Eric Werthheim, “China's Amphibious Apex: Type 075 Assault Ships,” *Proceedings* 150, no. 8, August 2024; and Matthew P. Funaiolo et al., “China's Massive Next-Generation Amphibious Assault Ship Takes Shape,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 1, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-massive-next-generation-amphibious-assault-ship-takes-shape>.

84 Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, p. 18.

85 David A. Ochmanek, “Determining the Military Capabilities Most Needed to Counter China and Russia: A Strategy-Driven Approach,” *RAND Perspective*, June 2022, p. 4, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PEA1900/PEA1984-1/RAND_PEA1984-1.pdf.

different ways.⁸⁶ *Denial* rests on the ability to degrade a rival's combat power so it cannot achieve its objectives in the first place. *Punishment*, by contrast, would largely forgo blunting an adversary's initial assault and focus on imposing costs, often on economic targets rather than purely military ones, sufficient that it will choose to abandon its aggressive campaign. Last, *rollback* would also downplay a strong defense of the status quo from the outset of a conflict in favor of a subsequent brute force effort to evict an adversary from any territory it seizes. Both punishment and rollback would temporarily cede Taiwan to China, assuming that the Taiwanese could not hold out on their own. That would be unacceptable if U.S. policymakers insist that the island must remain free from PRC control.

The second reason that denial is often favored by policymakers is the need to bind the United States to its local allies.⁸⁷ One of Washington's chief advantages in its competition with China is its network of alliances and security partnerships. These not only represent an enormous amount of economic and military power arrayed against the PRC, but they also enable U.S. forces to operate across the region by hosting bases, providing access, and allowing overflight.⁸⁸ An inherent drawback of alliances, however, is that they can fracture under too much pressure. China, therefore, has incentives to isolate and neutralize U.S. allies and partners, breaking this network apart piece by piece. That said, denial requires a robust forward presence to facilitate a rapid defense of territories under threat, which raises the likelihood that China would need to conduct widespread attacks to overturn the status quo. In theory, that should draw the United States, its allies, and its partners closer together rather than leaving them vulnerable to a divide-and-conquer approach.

Denial could be pursued in many ways different ways, however. This could include degrading adversary military capabilities, information systems, command-and-control nodes, and logistics networks to disrupt an invasion before it is underway in earnest; relying on a heavily fortified front line to intercept an invasion fleet and attrite its supporting assets as they close with their targets; wearing down attacking forces once they reach those targets and establish their presence ashore; or some combination of these lines of effort. Political considerations could, however, exercise a significant influence over the character of a denial campaign, including the relative emphasis placed on deep strike versus defense in depth. These considerations suggest that the primary line of effort would entail targeting Chinese forces in, above, and below the Taiwan Strait.

The first consideration that would shape a denial campaign is reducing the likelihood of nuclear escalation. Any conventional conflict with a nuclear-armed power raises the prospect of nuclear use. These concerns have moved to the fore of defense policy debates in recent years as U.S. strategists and policymakers consider how the United States would fight

86 Montgomery, "Primacy and Punishment."

87 Colby, *Strategy of Denial*, chap. 10.

88 Evan Braden Montgomery, *Reshaping America's Alliances for the Long Haul* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2009), chap. 1.

China and weigh the merits of inching closer to potential PRC nuclear redlines in pursuit of conventional military advantage. Concerns about escalation have centered on the size of China's nuclear arsenal, which has traditionally been far smaller than that of the United States, as well as its propensity for entangling conventional and nuclear capabilities in a variety of ways.⁸⁹ Given these factors, analysts and policymakers have been concerned that conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland could degrade the PRC's strategic deterrent and trigger a nuclear reprisal out of shock, confusion, or desperation.

The second consideration that could influence a denial campaign is avoiding the collapse of Taiwanese resistance. There are persistent concerns among U.S. policymakers that the island's armed forces might not demonstrate enough endurance under pressure and that its general public might be content to settle for peace at any price as the costs of conflict mount.⁹⁰ Given those concerns, it is reasonable to suspect that the United States would want to prevent the PLA gaining a foothold on Taiwan, even if the invading troops might be quite vulnerable once ashore, because it could signal that Taiwan is in jeopardy, spur a sense of defeatism, and erode the commitment to resistance.

Collectively, these factors suggest plausible constraints on how a denial campaign is likely to unfold over time and space—not ironclad boundaries, to be sure, but rough limits on when, where, and how U.S. forces would conduct operations. Most efforts to defend Taiwan would probably be directed against adversary forces while they were within the relatively narrow confines of the Taiwan Strait, whether offshore, undersea, or in the air. Of course, U.S. policymakers could always relax or abandon those limits if they made different calculations about the willingness of their Chinese counterparts to escalate or the willingness of the Taiwanese to fight, which could raise the likelihood of early attacks on adversary forces as they mobilize on the mainland or later attacks on those forces if they establish a lodgment on the island. Nevertheless, an emphasis on operations within the general boundaries outlined above is probably a safe bet.

Within those boundaries, however, it is also likely that U.S. forces would attempt to inflict as much damage as possible as quickly as possible against the Chinese military and

89 Caitlin Talmadge, "Too Much of a Good Thing? Conventional Military Effectiveness and the Dangers of Nuclear Escalation," in Dan Reiter, ed., *The Sword's Other Edge: Trade-Offs in the Pursuit of Military Effectiveness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security* 41, no. 4, Spring 2017; Josh Rovner, "Two Kinds of Catastrophe: Nuclear Escalation and Protracted War in Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5, 2017; and James Acton, "Escalation Through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risk of an Inadvertent Nuclear War," *International Security* 43, no. 1, Summer 2018.

90 On the issue of Taiwan's resilience to aggression in general and its willingness to fight against overt aggression in particular, see Daniel Byman, Seth G. Jones, and Jude Blanchette, *Strengthening Resilience in Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024).

paramilitary units spearheading an invasion.⁹¹ Due to a combination of factors, including formative historical experiences, bureaucratic politics, and the understandable desire to minimize the human and material costs of war, the Joint Force, like many other military organizations over time, has a natural preference for decisive engagements: limited, brief, geographically contained conflicts that aim for conclusive battlefield outcomes.⁹² As one prominent defense analyst notes, “Naturally, most nations in history prefer rapid and decisive victory to the alternative,” even if wars often unfold in a very different fashion.⁹³

In the context of a fight with China, this preference often manifests in public commentary as the aspiration to inflict enormous damage on frontline enemy forces, bordering on annihilation, during an extremely brief window of time, with the aim of achieving sweeping operational success before the conflict escalates vertically or horizontally.⁹⁴ In other words, although Beijing may have a strong inclination toward a short, sharp war that leverages its geographic proximity to Taiwan and exploits Washington’s remoteness, there is a widely held view that Washington must be able to fight a short, sharp war of its own to stop Beijing from executing a military *fait accompli*.⁹⁵

There is, however, another (often implicit) rationale for the United States to pursue rapid decisive battle in the event of a conflict with China, one that has as much to do with other rivals as it does with the PRC. Simply put, if the United States no longer has the ability to successfully fight two major wars at once, then keeping its many rivals in a box might require winning the first war quickly and convincingly so potential opportunists will stay on the sidelines.

91 See Evan Montgomery and Julian Ouellet, “American Defense Planning in the Shadow of Protracted War,” *War on the Rocks*, November 18, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/11/american-defense-planning-in-the-shadow-of-protracted-war/>. See also Raphael S. Cohen and Gian Giantile, “The U.S. Should Get Over Its Short War Obsession,” *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/28/us-russia-ukraine-china-short-war-strategic-patience/>.

92 On the enduring appeal of decisive battles across history, as well as the enduring limitations of this approach, see especially Cathal J. Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

93 Michael O’Hanlon, “Is There an American Way of War? Why the Answer Must Be No,” *The Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 4, 2025, p. 10.

94 See, for example, David Ochmanek and Michael O’Hanlon, “Here’s the Strategy to Prevent China from Taking Taiwan,” *The Hill*, December 8, 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/584370-heres-the-strategy-to-prevent-china-from-taking-taiwan/>. The extreme version of this argument, which has been put forward by prominent defense experts and former senior officials like Bob Work and Michèle Flournoy, is that the United States should be capable of sinking hundreds of Chinese ships in a matter of days if the PRC attempts to seize Taiwan. For a summary and critical analysis, see Evan Montgomery, “Kill ‘Em All? Denial Strategies, Defense Planning, and Deterrence Failure,” *War on the Rocks*, September 24, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/kill-em-all-denial-strategies-defense-planning-and-deterrence-failure/>.

95 Josh Rogin, “The U.S. Military Plans a ‘Hellscape’ to Deter China from Attacking Taiwan,” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2024.

Decisive Battle and Global Risk

How can Washington reconcile the inherent limits of a one-major-war force, the growing prospects of conflict with an emerging military peer, and the enduring demands of security commitments across the globe? The default solution to this predicament—one that is rarely stated openly but flows directly from the pacing-threat / lesser-included-case approach to defense strategy as well as the emphasis on denial—rests on the ability to fight and win a rapid decisive battle against China. Winning a rapid decisive battle is an ambitious but appealing aim in service of deterrence and warfighting against a pacing threat, one that military planners and political leaders alike have often found tempting yet elusive. Implicitly, it is also the linchpin to managing the lesser included cases in a multi-theater, multi-rival world.

If the United States can preserve or restore conventional military overmatch with China and therefore can execute a swift and conclusive intervention in defense of allies and partners should deterrence fail, then other adversaries would have little occasion or incentive to challenge the status quo. As one U.S. official explained it when the Pentagon first fully embraced the one-major-war force planning construct, “Performing well in the first war and showcasing the awesome might of American military power should give an opportunistic aggressor pause.”⁹⁶

The problem, however, is that the logic of leveraging military advantage against the pacing threat to support multi-theater deterrence was questionable from the start and has become less plausible ever since.⁹⁷ In order for it to succeed, three conditions must obtain. First, a fight against China would need to precede any significant military campaign against another adversary, given the losses that could be incurred in a prior conflict. Second, a fight against China would need to be relatively brief to avoid the costs and risks that come with protraction. Third, a fight against China would need to leave the United States in a strong military position relative to both the PRC and other adversaries across the globe. Yet these assumptions about sequencing, speed, and scale of victory, which are at the heart of rapid decisive battle, are increasingly problematic.

First, consider sequencing. To the extent that the Pentagon adheres to a pacing-threat / lesser-included-case paradigm, it exacerbates the inherent tradeoffs associated with allocating and

96 Mitre, “Eulogy for the Two-War Construct,” p. 26. The logic of deterrence through dominance is similar to earlier arguments that the United States should develop military advantages significant enough to dissuade competitors from even pursuing the capabilities necessary to challenge it—a recurring theme in U.S. defense strategy documents during the early 2000s. For a discussion, see Andrew F. Krepinevich and Robert C. Martinage, *Dissuasion Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2008).

97 Fundamentally, this reflects an emphasis on sequential rather than simultaneous campaigns. For an alternative take on sequencing, one that emphasizes imposing costs on a lesser power (namely Russia) first to buy time and space for competition against the stronger rival (namely China), see A. Wess Mitchell, “Strategic Sequencing, Revisited,” Marathon Initiative, October 18, 2024, <https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Strategic-Sequencing-Revisited-Final-2024-10.pdf>.

employing military capabilities across multiple regions. By relying on many of the same capabilities to deal with multiple threats, the United States faces an interdependent commitment problem: the simple but powerful reality that forces deployed to one theater are not available for use in other theaters, at least not right away, and that forces damaged or destroyed in a conflict with one opponent are no longer available for use in a conflict with another opponent, at least not until they have been repaired or reconstituted. Thus, devoting assets and personnel to deal with the pacing threat will limit the military power that can be mobilized against lesser threats. More importantly, though, losses suffered against lesser threats will decrement the military power that can be marshaled against the pacing threat.⁹⁸

This dilemma would be most pronounced if there were simultaneous contingencies, but sequential conflicts pose challenges all their own. For instance, a crisis today involving a rival other than China would risk undercutting the ability to fight the PRC tomorrow, unless Washington is restrained enough to avoid military intervention in the first instance or disciplined enough to calibrate intervention in ways that avoid or at least minimize possible losses.⁹⁹ In other words, a one-major-war force would be even less than that if it had to fight its way through a lesser-included case before going up against the pacing threat.

Next, consider speed. Even if a contingency with China were to occur before any serious crisis or conflict involving another adversary, meaning the United States would have all its deployable forces available to deal with its pacing threat, Washington would still need to win quickly enough that windows for opportunistic aggression would remain closed—a tall order in many cases, but especially in a contingency that would unfold thousands of miles from the continental United States. The longer a conflict goes on, the greater the likelihood that other rivals might attempt to challenge the status quo in their regions while Washington was busy fighting. The problem, however, is that despite an obvious preference for a short war, any conflict between the United States and China could very well be a long one.

98 Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment.”

99 Operation Midnight Hammer against Iran and its nuclear program, along with Operation Absolute Resolve to capture Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, provides a useful example of these dynamics. On the one hand, it illustrates the reality that conflicts against the lesser-included cases are just as likely, if not more likely, to precede a clash with the pacing threat. On the other hand, it illustrates that it is possible to limit intervention against secondary rivals, at least in part to avoid seriously decrementing the combat power that would be available for a subsequent contingency involving the pacing threat.

The historical record suggests that although militaries often hope to win big and win fast, great power conflicts rarely unfold that way.¹⁰⁰ Should a clash between the United States and China occur, therefore, both sides might find themselves in a much longer fight than they anticipated. A limited aims offensive (like an attempted fait accompli against Taiwan) is a gamble; as Stephen Biddle notes, this type of attack “typically leaves the opponent in the field, risking a long war with uncertain consequences.”¹⁰¹ At the same time, a denial defense (like a counterinvasion campaign to protect Taiwan) might not inflict sufficient damage on an attacker to prevent it from reconstituting its losses and trying again. In the context of the pacing scenario that captures so much attention, this could mean a protracted war to defend Taiwan if China fails to seize it but is unwilling to stop trying. Alternatively, it could mean a protracted war to free Taiwan if the United States fails to stop an invasion but is unwilling to accept the new status quo. Or, it could mean a protracted war between the United States and China in which the battle over Taiwan is just the opening round of a wider conflict, one in which the island’s status becomes a secondary consideration.¹⁰² In any of these situations, the duration of a Sino-U.S. conflict would create openings for other rivals to threaten, coerce, or attack.

Finally, consider scale of victory. To manage global rivalries with a one-major-war force, defeating China first and defeating China fast would not be sufficient. After all, a relatively swift but Pyrrhic victory in a fight with the PRC—one that left the United States with limited magazine depth, far less force structure, and significant personnel losses—would still open the window to opportunism elsewhere. Under these conditions, the United States might not have sufficient military capability or capacity to deter other rivals. Just as worrisome, it might not have the political will to fight a second war after sustaining heavy losses in the first one.

Are these kinds of losses truly in the cards? It is impossible to know how a conflict would unfold until it occurs. Nevertheless, there are growing doubts among experts that the United States could inflict enough attrition on the PLA to prevent an invasion of Taiwan, at least not without suffering significant attrition of its own, due to factors ranging from the geography

100 Concerns about the likelihood of protracted war between the United States and China have been on the rise for the past several years, particularly as the military balance in the region has shifted more in the PRC’s favor and as doubts about Washington’s ability to inflict a quick defeat on the PLA have grown. See, for example, Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Protracted Great-Power War: A Preliminary Assessment* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2020); Hal Brands, *Getting Ready for a Long War with China: Dynamics of Protracted Conflict in the Western Pacific* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2022); Andrew Metrick, *Rolling the Iron Dice: The Increasing Chance of Conflict Protraction* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2023); Iskander Rehman, *Planning for Protraction* (New York: Routledge, 2023); and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Pathways to Protraction: Rethinking U.S.–China Conflict,” *The Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 1, Spring 2025.

101 Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2004), p.43.

102 Montgomery and Ouellet, “American Defense Planning.”

of the theater to longstanding vulnerabilities in U.S. forces and posture.¹⁰³ From the outset of a clash over Taiwan, forward-deployed U.S. forces would need to avoid significant losses at the hands of a PLA that has them in their sights and benefits from a first-mover advantage. Surviving U.S. forces would need to fight within the densest layers of China’s defense network or orchestrate a complex technical effort to destroy critical PLA targets from afar to prevent them from getting ashore. And reinforcements would need to transit thousands of miles over vulnerable air, sea, and information lines of communication. None of this means that the United States cannot stop a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. It does mean that the price of doing so is rising sharply, however, which has implications that extend far beyond East Asia.

The bottom line is that the prospects for a successful denial campaign against China are becoming much more daunting, especially if success means inflicting major losses on PLA forces in a short span of time without suffering considerable attrition while doing so. In part, this is due to the inherent competitive advantages the PRC enjoys over a geographically remote and globally deployed great power like the United States, including the ability to concentrate much of its attention and most of its resources on one chief rival. But it is also due to shifts in the regional military balance.

Despite widespread support for denial among experts within and outside the U.S. government, well-known limitations on U.S. power projection—including the vulnerability of air and sea bases to kinetic attack, the need for new platforms and munitions that can operate effectively in highly contested domains, the fragility of logistics networks and information systems, and capacity limitations across the Joint Force—have yet to be rectified. Meanwhile, the PRC continues to enhance its conventional military, paramilitary, and nuclear capabilities at a rapid pace. Perhaps even more important, though, the theory of victory that underpins denial does not explain how success at the operational level, even if a sweeping victory were possible, would be anything other than the first round of a longer fight against a revanchist rival whose impressive military industrial capacity would remain untouched and ready to rearm.¹⁰⁴ Together, growing operational challenges and a questionable theory of victory are ingredients for a long, costly war if deterrence breaks down. Given that Washington’s ability to hold other rivals in check turns on its ability to hold China in check, managing global risks under these conditions is likely to become more difficult as well.

103 On the potential costs of a campaign to defend Taiwan against invasion, see Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023). See also Jonathan Caverley, “The Taiwan Fallacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 7, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwan-fallacy>.

104 Montgomery and Ouellet, “U.S. Defense Planning.”

CHAPTER 4

Responding to the Rise of China While Managing Global Risks

With a powerful peer competitor, a longstanding set of secondary rivals, and a growing risk of opportunism both within and across different regions, the United States needs an approach to multi-theater deterrence that reflects an increasingly complex security environment. Yet Washington's existing method of managing these global risks rests on a fragile foundation: the military strength to win a rapid decisive battle in the event of a conflict with China.

In theory, the ability to defeat a pacing threat first, defeat it swiftly, and defeat it conclusively should enhance deterrence in the primary theater, set the conditions for victory there if deterrence fails, and discourage lesser-included cases from engaging in opportunistic aggression. Barring a significant overestimate of Chinese capabilities or a substantial increase in U.S. strength, however, a quick and clear-cut win is probably not in the cards if war should occur. A denial campaign in defense of Taiwan, which remains the focal point of U.S. defense planning, could be long, difficult, costly, and inconclusive, even if Washington's military power and political will has not already been weakened by an earlier conflict with another rival. When it comes to defense strategy, therefore, the United States may be getting China wrong—and if it gets China wrong, then almost by design it will get other rivals wrong, too.

Rather than placing the vast majority of its emphasis on decisively denying an invasion of Taiwan, therefore, Washington should adjust its defense strategy in the Western Pacific and embrace an alternative theory of multi-theater deterrence. Specifically, with respect to China, it should shift away from maximal denial in favor of minimum essential denial and protracted punishment. This would still entail raising the costs of a Chinese assault on Taiwan, but it would not elevate the defense of Taiwan over the defeat of China, even if this comes at the price of putting the island in more immediate danger. It would involve

preparing to inflict a variety of costs on the PRC over the course of a military campaign, which might be longer, less limited, and more geographically expansive than the brief, fierce, force-on-force conflict that military organizations often prefer. And it would aim to preserve sufficient capabilities with sufficient flexibility to not only carry out a protracted war against Washington’s main rival but also to help counter aggression elsewhere or impose costs on other adversaries.

By no means should the United States abandon the goal of deterring or responding to the invasion threat. Doing so would only leave Taiwan isolated, make invasion more likely, undermine regional alliances, and put Washington in a disadvantageous position if Beijing turns out to be less capable or less cost acceptant than most observers expect. But it should acknowledge that going “all in” to deny an invasion of Taiwan could come at an enormous cost, even assuming that a conflict does not escalate to nuclear use, undermining U.S. power and influence regionally and globally.

As the members of the National Defense Strategy Commission explained, the local military balance has shifted to such an extent over the years that an American defeat cannot be ruled out.¹⁰⁵ A more likely outcome is a Pyrrhic victory for the United States, one in which Beijing suffers considerable losses and cannot secure control over Taiwan, but Washington also experiences so many losses that it is poorly positioned for renewed hostilities with the PRC (which could have the early edge in any race to reconstitute combat power) and may not have sufficient military resources to keep opportunistic aggressors at bay (a threat that would only grow as U.S. losses mounted).

Given these considerations, Washington should scale back and more carefully tailor its strategy. That would mean rethinking core defense policy assumptions about responsiveness (how quickly it must react in a crisis), operational objectives (how much damage it needs to inflict on opposing forces), operational timelines (how long a conflict is expected to last), and the appropriate balance between risk to force and risk to mission (how many military assets it is willing to lose to achieve its objectives). Rather than attempting to intervene with the aim of inflicting heavy attrition on PLA units as quickly as possible, even at considerable risk to critical U.S. personnel and platforms, it should favor a more deliberate response with more limited aims and a greater emphasis on force preservation.

U.S. officials would also need to acknowledge that a lengthy war is the likely outcome if deterrence breaks down. That, in turn, would require deviating from the post–Cold War orthodoxy that contemporary wars are won mainly, if not almost entirely, with precision strikes against adversary frontline forces, and accepting instead that a punishment campaign targeting adversary economic strength and military industry is likely to play a crucial coercive role in a future great power war.

105 Harman and Edelman, *Commission on the National Defense Strategy*, pp. 6–7.

These changes would constitute a significant departure from the status quo. Nevertheless, they fit well with fast-growing concerns about Chinese military power, an emerging realization that legacy approaches to the defense of Taiwan are becoming increasingly problematic, and a renewed appreciation that when it comes to great power conflict, protraction is the rule, not the exception. Simply put, they reflect several changes in the security environment that are becoming more apparent. Compared to a maximal denial campaign, which concentrates combat power in one theater and runs the risk of heavy losses there, these changes would also leave the United States with enough residual military capability to credibility threaten a conventional military response against opportunistic aggressors. Thus, they would provide a new basis for multi-theater deterrence.

Right-sizing Denial

For more than a decade, denial has been the most common denominator among defense experts trying to determine how the United States can uphold its extended deterrence commitments and shore up the status quo in East Asia. This focus on denial has remained relatively constant amid the growth of Chinese military strength and the persistence of U.S. military vulnerabilities. Yet the potential costs of a Sino-American clash under these conditions are beginning to chip away at this consensus, which raises a critical question: Is denial still the key to deterring and fighting a major conventional conflict against an increasingly capable China?

Despite unfavorable trends in the military balance, a defense posture geared toward countering the PLA in the pacing scenario still benefits the United States, its allies, and its partners in a variety of ways, although only up to a point. Giving up on denial, for instance, would make it more likely that the PRC would opt for an invasion of Taiwan because there would be fewer obstacles in its path—or, perhaps more plausibly, would make it increasingly likely that Taiwan would concede under heavy pressure as it realized that it would have to hold out against a brute force campaign almost entirely on its own.

It would also put enormous strain on other U.S. security partnerships in the region. Although allies and partners would not want to see the United States suffer so many losses in defense of Taiwan that its near-term and long-term ability to protect them would be jeopardized, sacrificing the island in the face of outright aggression would almost surely deal a significant blow to Washington's reputation in the region. In other words, efforts to bind the United States to its allies could be counterproductive if the losses Washington sustained through its execution of a denial campaign degraded its relative combat power to the point that those allies were more vulnerable to PRC coercion.¹⁰⁶

106 On the potential reaction of U.S. allies and partners should Washington not intervene in defense of Taiwan, see Michael A. Hunzeker and Mark A. Christopher, *America's Taiwan Dilemma: Allies' Reactions and the Stakes for U.S. Reputation* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2025).

At the same time, although the challenges posed by China are indeed considerable on paper, its ability and willingness to execute a large-scale brute force campaign, with all its complexity and costs, remain uncertain. An invasion and occupation of Taiwan, even under the best of circumstances from a PRC perspective, would still be a gamble, given that amphibious and airborne assaults are some of the most difficult operations that armed forces can embark upon.¹⁰⁷

This would be an especially tall order for a military that has not engaged in significant combat operations in recent history. As the Pentagon's most recent report on Chinese military power noted, "Senior CCP and PLA leaders are keenly aware that China's military has not experienced combat in decades nor fought with its current suite of capabilities and organizational structures."¹⁰⁸ It is prudent to assume that the PLA's investments and training are producing an effective fighting force, but that force might not be as effective as many observers anticipate, something that would probably not be known until war broke out.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, China could also be more cost sensitive than most expect. Despite the commonly held view that if the CCP leadership opts for invasion there will be no turning back, its reaction to actual losses is uncertain. An authoritarian regime might be able to suppress or withstand criticism and press forward in the face of adversity if its military performs poorly; on the other hand, it might also be able to declare victory and weather a loss even if it fails to achieve its aims. Therefore, the barriers to disrupting an invasion may be lower than predicted, whether due to the realities of combat or a reluctance to sustain casualties. This provides another reason not to abandon denial prematurely.

Finally, raising the bar to invasion imposes a variety of costs on the CCP and the PLA, compelling them to continue prioritizing this type of campaign in their military spending, planning, and training.¹¹⁰ As one analyst has put it, it ensures that a Taiwan contingency remains China's pacing scenario, which stands to benefit the United States.¹¹¹ Maintaining the Taiwan Strait as the locus of Sino-American competition keeps the area as a flashpoint,

107 Montgomery and Yoshihara, "Conquering Taiwan by Other Means." See also Benjamin Jensen, "Not So Fast: Insights from a 1944 War Plan Help Explain Why Invading Taiwan Is a Costly Gamble," *War on the Rocks*, September 8, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/not-so-fast-insights-from-a-1944-war-help-explain-why-invading-taiwan-is-a-costly-gamble/>; and Hew Strachan, "D-Day and the Future of Amphibious Operations," *The RUSI Journal* 169, no. 3, July 30, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2024.2383094>.

108 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025*, p. 14.

109 For a skeptical take on the PLA's likely combat effectiveness, which could be inhibited by a variety of political constraints, see Timothy R. Heath, "The Chinese Military's Doubtful Combat Readiness," RAND Expert Insights, January 27, 2025, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA830-1.html>.

110 This fits with the natural tendency for rising powers to emphasize regional defense until their strategic circumstances enable them to shift focus to extraregional power projection. Zack Cooper, *Tides of Fortune: The Rise and Decline of Great Militaries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2025). See also Jack Bianchi, Madison Creery, Harrison Schramm, and Toshi Yoshihara, *China's Choices: A New Tool for Assessing the PLA's Modernization* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2022).

111 Caverly, "So What?" p. 50.

with all the dangers that entails, but also keeps the military rivalry between the two sides more geographically circumscribed than it otherwise might be.

Yet these benefits of denial come with a catch. The realistic prospect that U.S. forces could sustain heavy losses during a counterinvasion campaign and the geopolitical ramifications of those losses in East Asia and beyond mean that strategists, planners, and policymakers can easily go too far in their embrace of denial, especially if it remains the centerpiece of U.S. regional (and, by default, global) strategy. Assuming that the defense of Taiwan against a brute force assault is likely to be the beginning of a longer conflict with China, one with stakes that rise even higher than the island's immediate fate (namely, the balance of power and influence across the region and across the globe), sustaining significant attrition in personnel, munitions, and platforms would undercut Washington's ability to conduct a protracted campaign against its main rival. Assuming as well that the costs of a war with China would determine Washington's ability to deter or respond to threats posed by other rivals, then these losses, especially at the outset of that war, could also undermine stability elsewhere.

Under these conditions, Washington should recalibrate its approach to denial. Its goal should be to disrupt an invasion of Taiwan as much as possible at the lowest cost possible, at least in terms of the force structure and munitions needed to fight the longer war that probably lies ahead, and to keep potential opportunists in check.¹¹²

This does not mean that denial can be achieved cheaply, easily, with few losses, or little risk of escalation. The demands of minimum essential denial, in this case, are still likely to be quite large because a meager denial capability might not cause the PRC to think twice about engaging in aggression. But it does mean that U.S. policymakers should calibrate those attributes of denial that most increase costs—including the number and type of forces that need to be maintained forward under the shadow of Beijing's precision-strike complex, the speed with which reinforcements need to be dispatched, the amount of attrition that needs to be inflicted on frontline PLA forces, and most importantly the amount of attrition that Washington would be willing to sustain to keep Taiwan out the PRC's hands—with an eye toward keeping those costs down. And they should do so for two main reasons. The first is preserving the ability to engage in punishment during the broader and longer war with China that is likely to follow. The second is retaining a credible capability to threaten potential opportunists that might seek to exploit a great power war to extend their influence and harm U.S. interests.

112 This goes beyond simply acknowledging that denial alone is insufficient because it lacks a plausible theory of victory and therefore looking to add complementary tools of coercion. It also includes placing limits on the resources that denial consumes and the risks that should be taken to implement it. On the former approach, see Elbridge A. Colby and Yashar Parie, "Building a Strategy for Escalation and War Termination," Marathon Initiative, November 2022, <https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TMI-Building-a-Strategy-for-Escalation-and-War-Termination-FINAL-1.pdf>.

Revitalizing Punishment

Denial, in any form, might be a necessary element of deterrence and warfighting in East Asia, but it is unlikely to suffice if there is a conflict with China. Punishment is likely to play a much greater role than advocates of denial generally acknowledge.¹¹³ Success in a long war does not come solely from attriting an opponent's fielded forces—it often requires degrading the sources of that opponent's military power, including its economic and military industrial capacity, at home and abroad. Any strategy that focuses on inflicting losses on military units and personnel but does not impose significant costs on an opponent's economic wealth and geopolitical position is unlikely to create the conditions for a meaningful victory, whether that strategy is one of decisive denial in a short span of time or a modified “denial plus” approach that forgoes gambling on a quick victory in favor of more protracted attrition of adversary forces.¹¹⁴

The relative merits of denial versus punishment in the context of U.S. defense strategy toward China is hardly a new issue. For instance, the role of maritime interdiction to inflict economic pain on the PRC has been a recurring topic of debate as Beijing has transformed into Washington's number one rival.¹¹⁵ The appeal of maritime interdiction operations, especially as the main line of effort in a distant blockade, stems from several factors. Perhaps most importantly, it would apply a U.S. advantage against a persistent Chinese vulnerability. The United States has an unparalleled ability to operate and sustain air and maritime forces over enormous distances. Meanwhile, China depends on seaborne exports and imports for economic growth but lacks the ability to fully monitor and defend the lines of communication that connect it to markets and resources.

Critics, however, note that blockades have a mixed historical track record, particularly when employed as the main instrument of coercion against a rival; that contemporary targets of blockades, including and especially China, could take a variety of compensatory measures to reduce the costs they might suffer; that Beijing probably would be willing to absorb considerable economic costs in exchange for gaining control of Taiwan because of how much it

113 Zack Cooper, “How War in Taiwan Ends,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 6, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/how-war-taiwan-ends>.

114 Montgomery and Ouellet, “U.S. Defense Planning.” On the denial-plus approach, see David A. Ochmanek et al., *Inflection Point: How to Reverse the Erosion of U.S. and Allied Military Power and Influence* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2023).

115 On the potential benefits and drawbacks of a blockade of China, see Sean Mirski, “Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 26, no. 3, 2013; Evan Braden Montgomery, “Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4, 2014; Gabriel Collins, “A Maritime Oil Blockade Against China: Tactically Tempting but Strategically Flawed,” *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 2, Spring 2018; and Fiona S. Cunningham, “The Maritime Rung on the Escalation Ladder: Naval Blockades in a U.S.–China Conflict,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4, 2020. For a discussion of punishment as an alternative to denial with an emphasis on nonmilitary tools of punishment like economic sanctions, see Melanie W. Sisson, “Taiwan and the Dangerous Illogic of Deterrence by Denial,” Brookings, May 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/taiwan-and-the-dangerous-illogic-of-deterrence-by-denial/>.

desires the island; and that a distant blockade of the PRC would be accompanied by a host of practical challenges, from identifying cargo bound for its ports to disposing of any ships seized by U.S. forces. To the extent that there is any widespread support for punishment, therefore, that support is usually given to *punishment by default* (a fallback option should denial fail) rather than *punishment by design* (the main line of effort from the outset or an equal one alongside denial).

These criticisms have merit, at least in the context of a one-dimensional punishment campaign focused on quickly achieving a single objective such as compelling the PRC to withdraw from or relinquish Taiwan. In this case, a balance of interests that seems to favor China, along with the extended time that might be required for a blockade to have a significant effect on it, would probably put the United States in a disadvantageous position. In the context of a protracted conflict, however, one in which victory is not measured solely by the status of Taiwan but also by the broader balance of economic and military power between the combatants, the utility of punishment is likely to be far greater.

Past great power wars, for example, have often been lengthy affairs in which both sides seek to impose costs on their opponents in more ways than one—not only by degrading their frontline combat forces to prevent them from achieving their immediate objectives but also by weakening the infrastructure that supports those forces, the industries that would reconstitute them, and even their economies writ large. To the extent that the United States remains focused on very quickly attriting large numbers of enemy forces in a relatively narrow geographic area, it risks overemphasizing what could turn out to be the first battle at the expense of underemphasizing the longer war that is likely to follow.¹¹⁶

This would still be true even if Washington could achieve something akin to a rapid decisive victory in battle, especially given that China would almost certainly remain an enduring adversary with an enormous military industrial base and a deep grudge over the damage it would have suffered. Yet the ability of the Joint Force to generate sufficient combat power to inflict rapid and decisive losses on the PLA while avoiding enormous losses to itself is questionable as threats to air and sea bases, high-signature forces, information systems, and expeditionary logistics grow. The notion of a long-term punishment campaign might be at odds with the understandable American preference for a short war with limited aims, low casualties, and little collateral damage, but it is difficult to imagine that a great power war between two sides locked in an intensifying rivalry would stay so restrained.

A contemporary campaign of punishment by design, moreover, need not be limited to a distant maritime blockade that might not impose adequate costs on its own, although it should not (and, for a variety of practical reasons, probably could not) include the widespread bombardment employed by many states, past and present, that have essentially resorted to terror due to technological limitations or the lack of normative guardrails.

116 Montgomery and Ouellet, "American Defense Planning."

Rather, the campaign would probably entail some combination of maritime interdiction or interception operations (perhaps along the eastern edge of the Indian Ocean, where China’s critical resource imports from the Middle East and Africa would need to pass through distant geographic chokepoints, or eventually farther away as China’s own power projection capabilities grow), other forms of horizontal escalation (to include targeting PLA forces operating abroad and perhaps Chinese dual-use economic infrastructure in other regions now that Beijing has a much broader and deeper global presence),¹¹⁷ and some forms of vertical escalation with conventional capabilities (such as holding at risk economic targets on mainland China, mainly industries that directly or indirectly support the PLA).¹¹⁸ Conventional punishment strategies could also leverage a wide variety of tools, including kinetic and nonkinetic attacks.¹¹⁹

Efforts like these would leverage two asymmetric advantages that the United States continues to enjoy, although these advantages might not last indefinitely. First, when it comes to horizontal escalation, Beijing is an increasingly global economic power, yet it remains a mostly regional military power given its focus on local contingencies. This creates opportunities for Washington to target its overseas interests. Second, when it comes to vertical escalation, the United States is more capable of conducting conventional operations against targets on China’s territory than vice versa given its specialization in global power projection.

Credible threats to inflict either or both forms of punishment by design could discourage aggression by holding at risk not just opposing military forces but also the other foundations of the PRC’s great power aspirations, thereby adding to the deterrent value that denial already brings. Punishment threats could also impose a variety of additional costs on China during peacetime, causing it to actively defend a wider swath of targets over a wider geographic span rather than needing only passive countermeasures like alternative

117 Gabriel Collins and Jack Bianchi, *Steel, Cement, Servers, and Sovereignty: A Geoeconomic Framework for Countering China’s Global Infrastructure Power* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments; The Baker Institute, forthcoming).

118 On the potential characteristics and requirements of operations against military-industrial targets, see Tyler Hacker, *Beyond Precision: Maintaining America’s Strike Advantage in Great Power Conflict* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2024), pp. 39-40. The notion of conventional strikes on mainland targets has long been a point of controversy, given the heightened potential for nuclear use that could result. The growth of China’s strategic nuclear arsenal could reduce this risk, however, given that it would effectively remove the pathway to nuclear use that is often associated with mainland strikes: the possibility of degrading Beijing’s comparatively small strategic deterrent. For a discussion of China’s nuclear modernization, the expansion of its arsenal, and what it means for escalation dynamics in a conventional conflict, see Montgomery and Yoshihara, “The Real Challenge.” On the broader debate over the merits and downsides of conventional attacks on mainland Chinese targets, see John Speed Meyers, *Planning War with a Nuclear China: U.S. Military Strategy and Mainland Strikes* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2023).

119 On the potential utility of punishment for deterrence in space, particularly through the development and deployment of non-kinetic counterspace weapons by the United States, see Katherine E. Dahlstrand, “Securing Space Superiority: U.S. Deterrence Options in a Two-Rival Threat Environment” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2025).

transportation routes for critical imports and exports that might be targeted.¹²⁰ And those threats could contribute to warfighting by putting the United States in a better position to carry on a lengthy conflict, both through the husbanding of select U.S. forces during an initial clash with the PLA and the use of those forces to make reconstitution of losses by the PLA even more difficult.

None of this means that punishment, whatever form it takes, would be a silver bullet. Like any strategy, it entails risks. Perhaps more than most, it will be characterized by uncertainty, insofar as the conditions under which it is likely to be successful require judgments about the political calculations that would be made by an adversary, not simply estimates of more easily measurable factors such as weapon effectiveness and attrition rates. Nevertheless, given the limits of denial against a major power, the potential for protracted conflict, and the enduring challenge posed by rivals in other regions, recalibrating the balance between denial and punishment should be an urgent and important aspect of U.S. defense strategy.

The Hardware and Software of Strategic Realignment

Placing less emphasis on denial and more emphasis on punishment could better position the United States relative to China in at least two ways. Perhaps most importantly, it would establish a stronger foundation for a longer conflict against the pacing threat. After decades of strategy development and force design focused on relatively weak rivals, not to mention technological advances that have allowed accuracy to substitute for mass, the U.S. military has spent more than a generation planning for short, limited, geographically contained wars that are won by employing precision-guided munitions against opposing combat forces. Fighting China over the fate of Taiwan—and the broader balance of power across the Western Pacific—would require a paradigm shift. The practical implications of that shift include the need to preserve enough forces at the outset of a conflict to conduct a lengthy campaign and, just as importantly, using those forces to undermine the adversary's economic and industrial capacity.

At the same time, however, emphasis on the pacing scenario should not cause strategists and planners to lose sight of the possibility that Chinese aggression against Taiwan could unfold in a very different way than brute force invasion. For instance, China might opt instead for a coercive campaign, one that includes air and maritime blockade of the island, political warfare and subversion against its leadership and population, and even nuclear threats against the United States and its allies, all with the aim of inducing doubt, delay, and

¹²⁰ This could also inflict virtual attrition on the PLA in wartime if it opted to devote military resources to the defense of infrastructure, shipping, or other potential targets of a punishment campaign. Evan Montgomery, Travis Sharp, and Tyler Hacker, "Quality Has a Quality All Its Own: The Virtual Attrition Value of Superior-Performance Weapons," *War on the Rocks*, June 19, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/06/quality-has-a-quality-all-its-own-the-virtual-attrition-value-of-superior-performance-weapons/>.

decision paralysis among key audiences.¹²¹ A maximal denial strategy that locks the United States into a rapid, large-scale, yet operationally narrow military campaign might be a poor fit for responding to this more nuanced challenge. Instead, Washington might need a multi-pronged coercive campaign of its own, one that gradually increases the price that Beijing would pay and, hopefully, convinces it to back down.¹²²

As for other U.S. rivals, this shift in strategy would also better position the United States to manage opportunistic aggression in other regions—perhaps not to the extent that the most devoted advocates of global military engagement would like, but almost certainly more than if it put maximum effort toward denial in the Taiwan Strait. Because a circumscribed approach to denial, paired with a commitment to gradually mete out punishment, would reduce the immediate risk to critical force structure, the United States would have more assets to draw from in support of deterrent threats aimed at other rivals and, if necessary, military intervention against them. In addition, many of the forces most useful for punishment—especially air and maritime power projection capabilities that have the flexibility and range to contribute to distant maritime interdiction operations, force projection in support of horizontal escalation, and even mainland strikes—could be redistributed and employed elsewhere if U.S. policymakers determined that doing so was worth the cost.¹²³ They could, therefore, backstop ally-led denial campaigns in theaters where expansion is an opponent’s aim or continue to inflict punishment in theaters where a rival is attempting to coerce its neighbors rather than control territory.

But what would an adjustment in regional defense strategy and an alternative approach to multi-theater deterrence mean for the composition and character of the Joint Force? That is, what would moving away from maximal denial and placing more emphasis on punishment suggest for force design, development, and acquisition? Changes in force structure are certainly necessary. Indeed, the bind the Pentagon now finds itself in can be explained in part by the mismatch that has long existed between the capabilities it has often prioritized (those with relatively limited range, large signatures, and low payloads) and the capabilities that are widely understood to be the most useful against its current pacing threat (those with longer range, lower signatures, and larger payloads). The Pentagon should embrace many of these changes, though, regardless of the strategy it adopts. In other words, there is considerable overlap in the capabilities needed to support a maximal denial campaign or

121 Nevertheless, given the potential costs of a conflict in and around the Taiwan Strait, the strategic and economic consequences of the island’s fall, and the common conviction that a U.S. military capable of defeating a Chinese invasion could handle any other threats from Beijing all suggest that a counterinvasion campaign will remain the pacing scenario.

122 For a discussion of this alternative that China might adopt, including the rationale behind it and what it might look like, see Montgomery and Yoshihara, “Conquering Taiwan by Other Means.”

123 In other words, the United States would need to lean more heavily on some of the traditional advantages enjoyed by maritime great powers, including the ability to leverage power projection assets to support a wide range of missions across different theaters. Williamson Murray, “Grand Strategy, Alliances, and the Anglo-American Way of War,” in Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray, eds., *Grand Strategy and Military Alliances* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 46.

a punishment campaign. Whether Washington opts to retain its current approach to countering China and managing global risks or chooses instead to shift away from the status quo, some of the biggest decisions it faces should produce many of the same results.

This basic insight was reflected in a Strategic Choices Exercise (SCE) held by CSBA, the results of which are largely consistent with many past exercises.¹²⁴ During the SCE, experts from across the U.S. government, defense industry, and think tank community considered how to adjust Department of Defense investments over the next decade to maximize U.S. warfighting advantages in two alternative China contingencies: prompt denial and protracted defeat.

As summarized in Table 1, in the case of prompt denial, teams sought to optimize the U.S. military's ability to rapidly defeat Chinese invasion forces en route to Taiwan, even at considerable risk to U.S. forces. Under protracted defeat, by contrast, teams sought to maximize the U.S. military's ability to contest PRC control of Taiwan over a longer period through comparatively modest efforts to disrupt an invasion, a greater emphasis on force preservation at the outset of a war, and the imposition of costs on the CCP and PLA through various forms of vertical and horizontal escalation over many months, if not longer.¹²⁵ Put differently, teams were tasked with designing a Joint Force for maximal denial or a combination of denial and punishment.

Regardless of how the United States planned to deter and, if necessary, fight China, participants reached a number of common conclusions. Specifically, they believed that Washington would need a more robust defense industrial base capable of greater output, whether to stockpile munitions for a short but intense fight or to increase magazine depth for a lengthy conflict. They determined that it required more platforms with the range to operate over long distances and the survivability to operate in highly contested environments, whether those platforms would be employed to attrite adversary forces in the epicenter of the PRC's precision-strike complex or to conduct raids farther afield as part of a global cost-imposing campaign. And they emphasized unmanned systems that could supplement, complement, and perhaps in some cases replace crewed platforms to enhance fleet size, firepower, sensing, and protection across both scenarios.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ In a strategic choices exercise, participants engage in force rebalancing over a 10-year time horizon using CSBA's strategic choices tool: an open-source, web-based, interactive force structure rebalancing application that allows users to add or cut items in DoD's budget across different investment categories. For examples of how this tool has been employed, see Todd Harrison and Mark Gunzinger, *Strategic Choices: Navigating Austerity* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, November 2012); Jacob Cohn and Ryan Boone, eds., *How Much Is Enough? Alternative Defense Strategies* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, November 2016); and Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, *America's Strategic Choices: Defense Spending in a Post-COVID World* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, January 2021).

¹²⁵ The full results of this exercise can be found in Sharp et al., *Relook Playbook*.

¹²⁶ Likewise, there were capability areas that exercise participants generally opted to scale back in both the prompt denial and protracted scenarios, including fourth-generation fighters, ground forces, the Littoral Combat Ship, and the A-10.

TABLE 1: COMPARING PROMPT DENIAL WITH PROTRACTED DEFEAT

	Prompt denial	Protracted defeat
Strategic assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taiwan is not independently capable of denying a PLA invasion The loss of Taiwan to the PRC would be catastrophic for U.S. security and impair U.S. viability as a strategic competitor to China Military operations beyond the Taiwan Strait are likely to be unacceptably escalatory or ineffective U.S. allies and partners will provide the basing and access it needs to support a prompt denial campaign Reducing risk to mission should outweigh reducing risk to force when attempting to deny a PLA invasion of Taiwan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taiwan is not independently capable of denying a PLA invasion The loss of Taiwan would damage U.S. security, but it is only one aspect of long-term U.S.–China strategic competition Vertical and horizontal escalation may be useful for disrupting an invasion and coercing the CCP U.S. allies and partners may not provide the basing and access it needs to support a prompt denial campaign Reducing risk to force should outweigh reducing risk to mission when attempting to disrupt a PLA invasion of Taiwan
Rebalancing guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design a force that can inflict enough attrition on the PLA to prevent it from establishing a beachhead on Taiwan Design a force that can impose cumulative losses so the PLA is unable or unwilling to continue large-scale amphibious operations against Taiwan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design a force that can impose select attrition on the PLA to raise the costs of establishing a beachhead on Taiwan Design a force that can impose costs on the PLA and CCP through vertical and horizontal escalation
Common investment areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Munitions B-21 bomber Space systems Collaborative Combat Aircraft Virginia-class submarine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiatives to counter small unmanned aerial systems Air and sea autonomous systems Indo-Pacific military construction Defense industrial base enhancements

This does not mean that different defense strategies do not introduce difficult tradeoffs. Areas where force structure requirements could diverge include homeland air and missile defense and critical infrastructure cybersecurity, which reflects variation in the geographic span of a potential military campaign. During the exercise, participants tasked with the prompt denial approach generally avoided spending more in these categories. The general rationale was that, in the context of a short, sharp war, the United States and China would likely moderate (though perhaps not avoid) kinetic and nonkinetic attacks on each other’s territory in an effort to keep a limited conventional war from escalating in intensity. When participants were tasked with rebalancing the Joint Force for protracted defeat, however, that calculation changed dramatically. In that case, participants looked for ways to strike a variety of targets on China’s territory to impose costs on the CCP and PLA—and they expected China to threaten U.S. territory for similar reasons.

Common areas of investment also should not obscure the wide variety of ways in which prompt denial and protracted defeat might be achieved or the uncertainty about which force structure and posture choices are correct in either scenario. For example, a more circumscribed approach to denial might lean heavily on leveraging small inexpensive drones, such as swarms of unmanned aerial systems or distributed unmanned surface and undersea platforms, although the ability of affordable-mass systems to generate sufficient firepower in a Taiwan contingency is still up for debate.¹²⁷ Alternatively, denial might best be accomplished by relying more on survivable, forward-based, long-range strike systems, like mobile ground-launched missiles, although the political, technical, and fiscal barriers to fielding enough of these systems to disrupt an invasion are very real.¹²⁸ And, of course, it might (and probably would) entail a mix of the two.¹²⁹ As in most cases, there is no single correct answer.

Nevertheless, the significant overlap in force structure and investment priorities is telling. Measures that would deepen the U.S. arsenal across the board, new technologies that offered the promise of affordable mass, and platforms with the flexibility to be deployed across regions and the fungibility to be employed across different mission areas all received high marks under a wide range of conditions. These areas should remain a key focus for defense investment if the United States wants to balance the demands imposed by competition with its pacing threat against those imposed by other rivals that might be tempted into opportunism.

Yet this overlap also means that many of the most important questions Washington faces are not related to force structure per se but rather to politics and strategy—that is, when, why, and how its forces are employed, as well as the risks it should avoid or accept. Less emphasis on denial would require reconsidering assumptions about the speed and scale of any intervention in defense of Taiwan, the amount of attrition Washington should aim to inflict on adversary forces in the course of that intervention, and most importantly how much risk it is willing to accept to its own forces during an initial campaign (especially to the forces that are most useful for punishment). The practical implications of this recalculation might include, for example, a greater willingness to husband platforms such as aircraft carriers and the surface combatants that protect them, given their utility for global power projection; their vulnerability in a denial campaign; and the difficulty of replacing them due to their

127 Joseph Trevithick, “Affordable Mass’ Concept Driving Air Force’s New Advanced Drone Initiative,” *The War Zone*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.twz.com/affordable-mass-concept-driving-air-forces-new-advanced-drone-initiative>. For more general discussion of this concept, see Christian D. Brose, “Moneyball Military: An Affordable, Achievable, and Capable Alternative to Deter China,” Hoover Institution, 2023, <https://www.hoover.org/research/moneyball-military-affordable-achievable-and-capable-alternative-deter-china>; and Michael C. Horowitz, “Battles of Precise Mass,” *Foreign Affairs* 103 no. 6, November/December 2024.

128 Jacob Cohn et al., *Leveling the Playing Field: Reintroducing U.S. Theater-Range Missiles in a Post-INF World* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019); and Thomas G. Mahnken et al., *Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Western Pacific* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).

129 Sharp et al., *Relook Playbook*, pp. 16–17.

size, cost, and complexity. The price, of course, would be accepting more risk when it comes to keeping Taiwan free of Chinese control.

At the same time, however, an alternative strategy might mean embracing other risks to amplify the effectiveness of the forces that are still devoted to denial. Descriptions of maximal denial often focus on fighting adversary forces in, above, and below the Taiwan Strait. The reasons seem to include reducing the escalatory dangers associated with striking targets on the Chinese mainland and increasing, or at least not degrading, the resilience of Taiwanese defenders. Scaling back denial while maintaining a credible threat to disrupt (if not defeat) an invasion might require Washington to adjust its risk tolerance on both fronts and walk back these self-imposed constraints. Expanding the geographic scope of a denial campaign in two directions through a greater willingness to go deep and fight close in would mean counting on nuclear deterrence to hold and Taiwanese forces to hold out.¹³⁰ But it would also enable the Joint Force to mount a broader counterinvasion campaign rather than a narrower counteramphibious landing operation—maximizing the disruption it could inflict on the PLA early on while minimizing the force structure devoted to that cause.

130 This is very similar to the underlying thrust of CSBA's AirSea Battle operational concept, which proved very controversial when it was published more than a decade and a half ago—mainly for advocating a U.S. blinding campaign against PLA battle networks, many components of which would be located on China's mainland. The purpose of that campaign was to degrade the effectiveness of PLA strike assets and therefore maximize the survivability and effectiveness of U.S. forces during an initial clash. Just as important, however (but often overlooked at the time and since), there was an explicit recognition among the authors that this clash would likely be followed by a protracted conflict, one that would require considerable defense industrial mobilization in the United States and a punishment campaign (in the form of a distant blockade) to achieve war termination under favorable conditions. See Jan van Tol with Mark Gunzinger, Andrew Krepinevich, and Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

It would be a cliché to suggest that the United States has reached a turning point, an inflection point, or perhaps a crossroads when it comes to its grand strategy and defense policy. Nevertheless, it seems increasingly apparent that the status quo may not be sustainable. The security environment is changing in significant ways. China's military strength has grown across the board and shows no signs of slowing down. Russia has weathered heavy losses in Ukraine and remains a threat to Europe. North Korea continues to expand its nuclear arsenal. Iran, despite all its weakness, is a persistent target for potential U.S. military intervention. All four of these rivals are collaborating more closely with one another. Meanwhile, Washington's efforts to adapt to these changes have fallen short.

For years, it has tried to put China front and center, from the pivot to the rebalance to more recent calls for prioritization. Yet it has not fundamentally altered its posture by concentrating military assets and activities in the Western Pacific rather than distributing them widely to meet other global security challenges. It still lacks the capabilities and infrastructure necessary to restore overmatch in the event of conflict with the PRC. And it has never truly reconciled the limits of a one-major-war force with the reality of a multi-theater, multi-rival world—let alone a world in which rivals across different theaters have growing incentives to support one another.

What kind of change is warranted in these circumstances? It is possible that Washington could juggle its commitments to place more emphasis on the China challenge without neglecting other threats, increase defense spending enough to shrink or close the Lippman gap, and encourage allies and partners to build up their military capabilities and take on more burdens. Indeed, the Trump administration has made its aspirations on all three fronts quite clear. Realistically, though, the inherent difficulty of competing with multiple rivals, the contentious politics of defense spending, and the practical challenges of ally and partner defense modernization give reason to doubt that any or all of these efforts would solve Washington's strategic problem.

Another avenue of change, which could be either a substitute or a complement to those outlined above, would be to reconsider the Pentagon's emphasis on denial of a Taiwan invasion and its implicit reliance on rapid decisive battle against China as the key to managing the risks posed by other rivals. The ability to quickly and conclusively defeat the pacing threat is understandably appealing, as is the rationale that restoring overmatch will keep other rivals in check. But the likely cost and duration of a conflict with Beijing would unravel both parts of this equation—not only is rapid decisive battle looking less plausible, but heavy losses in a maximal denial campaign would decrement Washington's ability to carry out a long fight and keep enough capability in reserve to manage the risks of opportunism.

Downgrading denial as the central objective of U.S. defense strategy in the Western Pacific and giving punishment much more prominence in deterrence and warfighting would reduce the danger of an early but Pyrrhic victory in a China fight, better reflect the character of the long war that would probably unfold if Washington and Beijing did come to blows, and preserve some ability to project force against other rivals contemplating opportunism. These are not easy changes to accept or make, but the alternatives would be harder still.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

A2/AD	anti-access / area denial
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSBA	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCE	Strategic Choices Exercise



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