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"China's Offensive Missile Forces: Implications for the United States"**

Prepared Statement of Elbridge Colby

Robert M. Gates Fellow

Center for a New American Security

Vice Chairman Shea, Commissioner Tobin, and other distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the implications of China's growing arsenal of offensive missile forces in the context of its broader military buildup for the United States. The development of these increasingly capable forces by the People's Republic of China (PRC) poses a growingly significant challenge to the interests of the United States. As the Commission has already received testimony detailing the nature and scope of this challenge, I will focus the majority of my statement on the implications for the United States of this abhorning threat and what the United States might do to mitigate, adapt to, and respond to it.

The Nature and Scope of the Chinese Conventional and Nuclear Offensive Missile Threat

Conventional Capabilities

As is well known, China has been investing substantially since the 1990s in developing a sophisticated arsenal of conventional ballistic and cruise missiles able to strike accurately, rapidly, and with material effect against U.S. and allied bases, vessels, and other targets in the Western Pacific. While the exact impetus for and precise level of progress of this initiative are both difficult to establish with precision, what is clear is that China has been able to develop a highly sophisticated and large missile force and that the challenge it poses to the U.S. military posture in the Pacific is real and increasingly serious.

But while China's missile arsenal represents one of the – if not the – most potent aspects of its military modernization program, it cannot be viewed in isolation. Rather, China's missile force needs to be seen in the context of the PRC's broader effort to develop a high-end conventional military able to contest U.S. military dominance in the Western Pacific and eventually very likely beyond it. This broader military buildup comprises increasingly sophisticated, resilient, and formidable command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities; naval and air forces; space and anti-space assets; and a range of other capabilities across the full spectrum of modern military force. While much of the focus of this initiative appears oriented at dealing with a Taiwan scenario, it is increasingly apparent that Beijing's ambitions have widened or are widening beyond Taiwan. Indeed, the PRC appears to be seeking ultimately to create a zone in the western Pacific within which the military power of

the PLA will be able to ensure that Chinese strategic interests are held paramount—in effect, to supplant the United States as the military primate in the region.

Based upon its efforts to date, China has in fact already been able to put together a formidable military, one that can contest U.S. military primacy in the Western Pacific, including in what the People's Liberation Army (PLA) refers to as “warfare under highly informationized conditions” – or, in more common parlance, modern, high-tech war. Indeed, the median point of contemporary defense expert opinion appears to be that the United States would already face a serious challenge to prevailing against Chinese military power over plausible conflicts in the Western Pacific, especially Taiwan – and that the situation is getting worse rather than better.

And it is the future that is the real problem. This is because the trend lines are worsening from the perspective of the United States and its allies. China's military buildup is continuing apace despite a slowdown in the PRC's overall economic growth even as U.S. defense investment is hobbled by sequestration and its associated spending restrictions as well as by the diffuse but perhaps more significant difficulties Washington finds in focusing its own military modernization efforts on the “pacing” challenge posed by the PRC. These difficulties include the draw of military attention to other regions of interest for the United States, organizational and programmatic inertia in the Pentagon and elsewhere, and, perhaps most perniciously, the simple unwillingness of large swathes of U.S. opinion to believe that U.S. military primacy could actually be seriously challenged. These unfavorable trends, of course, build upon a fundamental geographic conundrum that the United States faces in the Western Pacific: Washington seeks to retain military primacy in the waters and skies just off the Chinese coast, while Beijing seeks to seize the military upper hand in areas just off its shores. China is thus able to seek to exploit the advantages that derive in conventional warfare from proximity, the ability to deploy mass, shorter lines of communication, and a host of other factors.

Nuclear Forces

At the same time as China has been mounting an aggressive buildup of its conventional military, however, the PRC's nuclear arsenal is also becoming somewhat larger and considerably more sophisticated. While China continues to exhibit restraint regarding the size of its nuclear arsenal and in how it appears to think about the role of nuclear weapons in its military strategy, the PRC is nevertheless substantially modernizing its nuclear forces. These improvements include the deployment of more survivable road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles armed with multiple, independently targetable warheads and penetration aids designed to defeat missile defenses; the development and gradual deployment of a ballistic-missile submarine force; the fielding of new command, control and communications assets that enable more deliberate and controlled employment; and the marked improvement in training and professionalism among the PLA's nuclear warriors. The Department of Defense conservatively judged in its 2014 annual report to Congress on China's military modernization that “these technologies and training

enhancements strengthen China's nuclear force and enhance its strategic strike capabilities" and assessed that China will "implement more sophisticated command and control systems."¹

While these advances do not at this stage appear to portend an effort by Beijing to "sprint to parity," they do have serious strategic consequences even without such an attempt. That is because, whether deliberately pursued or not, these improvements will by necessity give Beijing more and better options for employing its nuclear weapons, especially in more limited and controlled ways. In the past, China's nuclear forces were considered vulnerable and blunt instruments, messy weapons that would only likely be used at the very top of the "escalatory ladder"—for instance, against the cities of its opponents. Needless to say, this presumably rendered the bar for Chinese nuclear use exceptionally high, an inference fortified by China's oft-trumpeted (if ambiguous and rarely fully trusted) "no first use" policy regarding its nuclear weapons.

But, armed with its new generation of nuclear forces, China will gain options for using them that are more discriminate in nature than those entailing massive strikes against American territory. Instead of only, practically speaking, having the option of striking at a major American or Japanese city, China will increasingly gain the ability to employ its nuclear forces in more tailored fashion—for example, against military facilities or forces, including in the region. This ability to use nuclear weapons in more limited and tailored ways will make China's threats—explicit or implicit—to use nuclear forces more credible.

The consequence of this is that China's nuclear force will cast a darker shadow over Sino-American competition in the Pacific. Thus, strategists and military planners in the United States and allied countries will need to take the possibility of Chinese nuclear employment in the event of conflict more seriously. This does not mean that China will reach for the nuclear saber early or often. But a more sophisticated force will give China better options for how it might seek to use these weapons not only, as in the past, as a desperate last resort, but also to deter U.S. escalation of a conflict—escalation the United States might need to resort to if it is to prevail.

The Strategic-Political and Military Implications of these Developments

This shift in the military balance driven by China's increasing conventional military capability and its more sophisticated nuclear force represents a major challenge for the United States, which has since the Second World War underwritten its strategy for the Asia-Pacific by military supremacy in maritime Asia.² During this era, U.S. forces could, generally speaking, defeat any

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2014*, (2014), 28-30, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_DoD_China_Report.pdf.

challenger in the waters of the western Pacific or in the skies over them. This allowed the United States to shape the regional environment in ways conducive to U.S. interests in open commerce and political interaction; sustain alliances with countries like Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand; and prevent Asia from being used as a springboard to challenge broader American interests and security. In brief, military primacy in maritime Asia has been the crucial predicate of broader American strategy in the Asia-Pacific.

A loss of military primacy in this region would, therefore, have profound strategic consequences for the United States and those nations that rely upon it. The United States has seen an open and friendly order in maritime Asia as crucial to its interests at least since Matthew Perry's "Black Ships" opened Japan in the nineteenth century; since the Second World War, it has seen its own military supremacy in the Pacific as the best way to secure and promote that order. If China can attain military dominance or even simply advantage in this area, the world's most dynamic region, then U.S. interests as traditionally understood are likely to suffer, perhaps seriously. It will be Beijing rather than Washington that will serve as the ultimate arbiter of what is and is not acceptable in Asia. It is a reasonable assumption that such a power structure would be considerably less congenial to Washington's interests—let alone those of U.S. allies—than the current order.

It therefore makes sense for the United States to strive to preserve its military advantages in the region. But prudence and realism suggest that we anticipate that the future conventional military balance in the western Pacific between the United States and its allies and partners on the one hand and China on the other will, at the very least, be far more even than was previously the case, and likely will become increasingly competitive. Over time, indeed, the balance may tip against the United States and its allies, at least in certain regions and with respect to particular contingencies about which the United States has traditionally cared.

Even without wholly losing the conventional upper hand in the Pacific, this highly probable shift toward a more even military balance in the region will likely lead to significant changes in the Asia-Pacific. It will likely make China more assertive, since Beijing will be more confident that resorting to military force could pay off for it in regional disputes it cares about, especially if a conflict can be kept relatively limited. We should therefore expect Beijing to be at least somewhat more ambitious and assertive. This point should not be controversial: the notion that greater strength makes one more assertive and ambitious is well demonstrated, both in international politics and in everyday life. Indeed, China's rising forcefulness in its near seas in recent years

² For an elaboration of these implications with a focus on their impact on the role of nuclear weapons in the Asia-Pacific, see Elbridge Colby, "Asia Goes Nuclear," *The National Interest* (January/February 2015) 28-37, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/welcome-china-americas-nuclear-nightmare-11891>.

appears to have been fueled by the nation's general sense of growing power as well as the expanding inventory of assets available to pursue its ambitions. For instance, China's acquisition of far more developed maritime and oil-drilling capabilities seem to have been playing a major role in Beijing's increased pushiness in the South China Sea.

A more even power balance is also likely to lead to a reordering of alignments and strategic postures in the region. Asian and Pacific states will continually judge the relative strength of the two titans of the Asia-Pacific as well as the pair's respective resolve and future trajectories, and will adjust their own policies and postures accordingly. Indeed, this is already happening. Old U.S. ally Thailand, for instance, has drifted away from Washington and moved closer to Beijing, while old U.S. adversary Vietnam, feeling the PRC's pressure in the South China Sea, has been warming up to Washington.

Taiwan may be the canary in the coal mine for these unfavorable trends.³ Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense stated in 2013 that the United States would not be able to block a Chinese invasion of the island by 2020. Of course, one might ascribe this judgment to special pleading on the part of Taipei—except that Taiwan's is not an isolated assessment; many defense experts share this view. Yet if the United States loses the military upper hand over Taiwan, it risks opening Taiwan and, to an important degree, itself to the potential for military-backed coercion by Beijing over Taiwan's status. A loss of the ability to credibly protect Taiwan from Chinese invasion or serious coercion could result in loss of confidence in other U.S. security commitments in Asia (and beyond) in the face of growing Chinese power. An outright seizure of Taiwan by China, meanwhile, would present an even more dramatic challenge to U.S. credibility and would also considerably simplify and assist China's efforts to project power beyond the so-called "First Island Chain" in the Western Pacific.

Nor should we expect a shift in the balance with respect to Taiwan to be the end of this trend. Rather, if the United States fails to maintain its edge over China, Beijing is likely to be able to attain practical military superiority in areas of maritime Asia other than Taiwan, and over the long term perhaps well beyond it. Indeed, success in gaining military advantage over a Taiwan contingency is just as – if not more – likely to encourage as it is to satiate Beijing's ambitions.

Assuming that the United States will not concede regional hegemony to Beijing (as it should not), that the United States and its allies will continue to have significant areas of tension and disagreement with an increasingly capable China, and that the United States will remain ready to use military force to defend or vindicate its and its allies' interests in Asia, this means that the United States may come to blows with a power deploying military forces of roughly comparable and, in some circumstances, possibly superior effectiveness. In simpler terms, it means that the

³ For an expanded version of this argument, see Elbridge Colby, "Can We Save Taiwan?" *The National Interest*, October 18, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-we-save-taiwan-9257?page=show>

outcome of a conflict between the United States and China will be more uncertain and that, if current trends are not redressed, the United States might well ultimately find itself on the losing end of a major military engagement in the western Pacific.

This more competitive military landscape between the United States and China is also likely to make conflict in the region more plausible. War is more likely in situations like this, when both sides think they can prevail, rather than when the prospective winner is clear. The great powers, for example, were more ready to fight in 1914 because each side believed it enjoyed a solid chance of victory. Conversely, a large amount of the stability and comity among the major powers of the post-Cold War world can be traced to a situation of “hegemonic stability”—the evident fact that no other power could venture beyond its own borders to challenge the United States in the years following the 1991 Gulf War. This more stable situation will no longer so clearly hold as resort to force in maritime Asia becomes a more reasonable option for Beijing.

If war does happen, then, the United States will have to fight much harder and under more stressing conditions than it would have in the past to prevail against China. This is well known and there has been ample work detailing the difficulties China's growing strength would impose on the U.S. military as well as suggestions for how the United States might overcome them.⁴ Indeed, the Pentagon itself appears increasingly and commendably seized with grappling with this problem. Through initiatives such as the Department's new “Offset Strategy” initiative, the Pentagon rightly appears to be focused on maintaining American advantages in the effective projection of conventional military force even in the face of a resolute and highly capable opponent like Beijing. This effort by the Department deserves to be lauded, supported, and encouraged, since it represents precisely the kind of effort to retain the conventional upper hand through using cost-efficient means that the United States should be undertaking.

The Growing Salience of Nuclear Weapons

Considerably less remarked upon than the difficulties the United States would face in a conventional conflict with China, however, is that, in the event of such a war between the United States and China, nuclear weapons are more likely to be implicated than they had been in the past. This is true because war in the region between the United States and China under circumstances of even rough conventional parity will be more susceptible to nuclear escalation. In the past, most defense analysts and planners envisioned a Sino-American conflict in maritime Asia starting and remaining a conventional fight. Given the PLA's very modest capabilities for such a contingency, the United States was seen as able to handle any Chinese attempts at power

⁴ See, for instance, the pathbreaking, foundational study by CSBA on a potential AirSea Battle campaign by Jan van Tol et al, “AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept,” (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 18, 2010), <http://csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/>.

projection solely by relying on U.S. conventional forces and with relatively limited requirements for vertical or horizontal escalation.

In practical terms, the United States would have been able to defeat Chinese attacks on Taiwan or other such plausible beneficiaries of American defense with relatively limited means and on Washington's terms. Nuclear weapons, if they were to become involved, were seen as most likely to be introduced in limited numbers by the Chinese in a desperate attempt to stave off defeat in a Taiwan contingency, a defeat that might jeopardize the legitimacy of the Communist regime. But the threat to resort to such usage was seen as of limited credibility and actual employment along these lines of minimal effectiveness in light of substantial American advantages in the quality and quantity of the conventional and nuclear forces it could use to conduct such a limited nuclear war.

But we will be moving into a world in which the basic assumptions that determined such assessments no longer hold. That is because future efforts to defeat Chinese attempts at power projection will not be so easily handled, especially without our needing to resort to vertical or horizontal escalation to prevail. In any contingency in the region, the growing sophistication of China's large military will mean that the United States will have a much more difficult time overcoming it, since Chinese systems that have longer range, are more accurate, are smarter and are more effectively netted together require more work, creativity and skill to defeat. Put more directly, the United States and its allies will have to fight harder, quicker, nastier, deeper, for longer, with less deliberation and over a wider battlefield than was the case in the past in order to defeat Chinese forces in maritime Asia.

For example, in the past, the United States might have designated Chinese fixed ballistic missiles of limited range and accuracy based on or near the coast for attack by aircraft operating safely with excellent and secure information later in a campaign. In the future, however, the United States might have to designate Chinese mobile ballistic missiles of longer range and better accuracy based farther in the country's interior for attack by aircraft operating perilously with limited information early in a conflict. So, for instance, if Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense is right that China will have the upper hand in a battle over Taiwan by the 2020s—but the United States still wants to deter or defeat an attempted Chinese invasion of the island—the United States may well need to be willing to hit targets deeper in China than had been envisioned before, strike sooner and expand the war considerably beyond the island's immediate environs in order to compel Beijing to back away from seizing Taiwan.

Even without anyone really wanting to introduce nuclear weapons into the equation, then, these trends raise classic "inadvertent escalation" risks. This line of analysis points to the dangers of escalation that can arise due to the way even a conventional war can unfold. In particular, if one needs to fight harder against an opponent in order to prevail, it also becomes harder to limit the

war—including in ways that might entangle nuclear weapons. For instance, U.S. efforts in the event of conflict to strike at Chinese command-and-control nodes, missile bases and systems, surveillance and intelligence assets, and the like, even if intended only to affect the nonnuclear balance, might well implicate nuclear weapons. This might be because such assets or capabilities might be collocated with nuclear forces or themselves have dual nuclear and conventional roles, because the Chinese might fear such hard-hitting attacks are a prelude to decapitation, or because the Chinese might misread conventional strikes as nuclear attacks. In the fog of war, any number of such dynamics could push toward consideration of nuclear use.

Nor would nuclear weapons necessarily be introduced into a potential Sino-U.S. conflict solely by China. Rather, it could well be the United States that elects to do so – and, in peacetime, to signal its willingness to do so in wartime for deterrence and assurance purposes. This willingness on the part of the United States stems from the unfortunate fact that Washington may lose the conventional military advantage it has historically enjoyed over China in maritime Asia. Such a loss would most plausibly be partial—China would be unlikely to seize whole the conventional upper hand in the region. But, having gained the advantage over some parts of the western Pacific, Beijing might, for example, attempt to force the United States into a situation in which Washington would be unwilling to take the necessarily escalatory steps to overcome or push back Chinese attacks. For instance, Beijing might gain conventional superiority around Taiwan and be able to block U.S. efforts designed to defend the island. In such a case, the United States might need to broaden the war, possibly by striking targets further into China and of greater value to the PRC's leadership, in order to persuade Beijing to agree to terms acceptable to Washington. The plausible threat of a limited Chinese nuclear response would prove a substantial disincentive to pursuing such a course.

A loss of U.S. conventional advantages in maritime Asia could come about because of a U.S. lack of resolve or inattention, because of the scale and effectiveness of China's substantial and ongoing military buildup, or because of some malign combination of both. Such a shift in the balance is more plausible in the foreseeable future regarding the western portions of the Pacific, but this apparent narrowing of the problem actually offers little comfort since the western Pacific is home to Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the nations of Southeast Asia, and is the eastern gateway to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Losing military primacy and thus regional strategic leadership there is hardly compensated for by preserving it over the Samoan Islands. Moreover, military primacy lost in the western Pacific is just as likely to be simply a stage on the way to further erosion as it is to be the terminus of a shift in the military balance.

In the event that the United States does lose its conventional advantage, Washington may well seek to rely on its own nuclear weapons to compensate for outright inferiority or for the inability of its conventional forces to fight back in a way sufficiently controlled to suit U.S. interests in limiting a conflict. This reliance would, in effect, be a return to U.S. policy during the Cold War, when Washington relied on its nuclear forces to offset Soviet conventional superiority in Europe.

In particular, Washington would likely seek to exploit its superior ability to conduct a limited nuclear war to deter China from taking advantage of its conventional lead.

Nor would this be likely to be a unilateral move on the part of the United States. Rather, it is reasonable to expect that beneficiaries of U.S. security guarantees would press for Washington's clearer and more emphatic adoption of such an approach. Even in a far more congenial security environment than the future sketched here, U.S. allies like Japan, South Korea and Australia have been insistent that the United States reaffirm that Washington's security guarantee ultimately is rooted in its commitment to use nuclear weapons to defend them. If the Chinese are able to develop not only the A2/AD capabilities but also the strike and power-projection assets needed to overcome U.S. conventional superiority, it seems reasonable to expect that U.S. allies will urge Washington to substitute for that conventional deficit with the nuclear force they already see as vital to their security.

The Possibility of Proliferation

This course will seem unappealing to many, not least in the United States, given the risks it will entail for Americans. But this disquiet points to another potential implication should China gain military primacy in the Western Pacific: the prospect of further nuclear proliferation in the region. If, as China grows stronger and more assertive, its conventional military power begins to outweigh that of the United States in maritime Asia, and that shift is not met by a greater U.S. reliance on its nuclear forces or some other effective countervailing steps, then those countries of Asia traditionally allied to or reliant upon Washington—countries that cannot hope to match China's strength at the conventional level—may ultimately see getting their own nuclear weapons as essential to deterring China's exploitation of its growing strength.

It is worth emphasizing that this will *particularly* be the case if these nations view a weaker United States as lacking the resolve or the ability to use its nuclear weapons on behalf of its allies, since in such a case they will be exposed to Chinese coercion. This is no fantasy; polls in South Korea already show substantial support for an indigenous nuclear-weapons program, and South Korea, Japan, Australia and Taiwan have pursued or seriously contemplated pursuing their own nuclear arsenals in the past and might do so again. In other words, in such a scenario a cruel dynamic will take hold in which diminishing U.S. conventional advantages will lead to pressure for greater emphasis on nuclear forces, but, in light of China's own advancing nuclear capabilities, such reliance itself will be decidedly less attractive.

The loss of U.S. conventional advantages would leave Washington with a series of unpalatable options. Relying more on nuclear weapons might raise the costs and risks of conventional war with China and thus fortify deterrence, but those costs and risks would increasingly redound not only against the PRC but also against the United States and its allies. Ignoring or refusing to

confront the nuclear implications of China's growing conventional advantages, on the other hand, would increase the impetus toward proliferation among Washington's allies and partners.

Such developments would put enormous pressure on what has been, since the end of the Cold War, a relatively easy dual pursuit of credible extended nuclear deterrence and nonproliferation. In the unipolar era, one policy served the other, and neither was very risky or costly. But during the darker days of the Cold War, there were bitter debates about whether the risks that extended deterrence involved for the United States were worth the benefits of nonproliferation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, those debates effectively vanished. But as China grows stronger, it will be harder and riskier for the United States to credibly extend nuclear deterrence against Beijing to U.S. allies—perhaps much harder—which will mean that using it to forestall proliferation will also be harder and riskier. The greater the danger posed by China's military and the broader its ambitions, the less plausible it is that Washington will be able to—or will want to—serve both masters. Thus, the more threatening and ambitious Beijing appears, the less likely it is that the strategic and nuclear order of the Asia-Pacific will endure.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

In light of this analysis, it is reasonable to judge that China's growing military power poses a major – and probably the most significant – challenge to U.S. military primacy and ultimately to the nation's legacy national security strategy in the coming years. What, then, are we to do about it? The best way for the United States to mitigate the negative implications of rising Chinese military power is relatively simple: to maintain its military advantage in the Western Pacific. Such superiority is the most reliable way to convince any leadership in Beijing that attempts to use its newfound military power for aggressive purposes would be futile, costly, and unwise, and thus to ensure Beijing's respect for the interests of the United States and for those of its allies and partners. Put another way, it is the best way to effectively balance China's growing military power.⁵ But, because of China's growing wealth and sophistication as well as its evident resolve to continue building up a more formidable military that can challenge U.S. supremacy in the region and ultimately perhaps beyond, this is an illustration of the old dictum that strategy is simple but very hard.

It is crucial, nonetheless, to try to maintain such advantage where feasible, as even a diminished margin of strength is preferable to losing all such advantage. The pressing question is, however, how to do so in a way that is feasible, sustainable, and practical. In all candor, though, there do not appear to be clean “solutions” to this daunting problem. Rather, there are steps that can mitigate and limit the malign effects of China's growing strength and minimize the decline of

⁵ For an excellent argument along these lines, see Ashley Tellis, “Balancing Without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China,” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/balancing_without_containment.pdf.

American relative military advantage, steps oriented around maintaining and, where the U.S. legacy posture is being rendered obsolete by China's buildup or technology, building anew a military position in the Asia-Pacific that is potent, credible, and adapted to the potential conflicts with the PRC that plausibly could arise. These steps are crucial not only in the event of conflict but equally for preventing such a conflict on terms acceptable to the United States and its allies. Deterrence, after all, derives most clearly and reliably from an evident ability to use force and to use it effectively and decisively.⁶

It therefore makes sense for the United States to dedicate itself to maintaining what military primacy it can in the Asia-Pacific. But what does maintaining such military primacy actually mean? And what does that conception entail?

What it means is the ability to fight a limited war in the Western Pacific better than China can. Why? The defining aspects of the strategic problem for the United States in this region are China's growing military power and its increasing ability to escalate against the United States and its allies and partners in ways that negate their military capabilities or cause them grave harm. This means both that the United States and its affiliates will find it harder to defeat China and control escalation in ways they prefer and that they will be increasingly vulnerable to serious attack by the PRC. Given the fact that the stakes in any conflict in the Western Pacific are, by definition, important but still nevertheless partial for the United States, Washington as well as its allies and partners will have a strong interest in limiting the destructiveness of any conflict with China. Needless to say, China will also have immense incentives to limit a conflict with the United States, given the enormous damage that it could wreak on the PRC.

This means that, in any conflict with the PRC, both sides will almost certainly want to limit the war. Within this context, the United States and its allies and partners will want to seek to *favorably* limit the war in ways that both protect themselves *and* that allow them to prevail. Put another way, because the United States and its affiliates are unlikely to enjoy untrammelled military dominance over China in the coming years, they must therefore find ways to retain or gain *escalation advantage* over Beijing. In simpler terms, the United States and its allies and partners must be *better at limited war* than China. Being better at limited war basically means being able to shape a conflict in such a way that an adversary will accept some sort of defeat (albeit a limited one) rather than elect to resort to his ability to escalate further.

The best way to accomplish this difficult objective is for the United States to ensure that the boundaries which both sides and third party observers accept as the established parameters of a limited conflict are ones within which it can prevail, and that the United States and its affiliates

⁶ For an excellent recent article on how to think about conventional deterrence in the context of China, see Jonathan Solomon, "Demystifying Conventional Deterrence: Great-Power Conflict and East Asian Peace," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Winter 2013), 117-157, http://www.au.af.mil/au/ssq/digital/pdf/winter_13/2013winter-Solomon.pdf.

have the forces, strategies, and doctrines available to achieve their (necessarily limited) aims within those bounds.⁷ In such a context, the United States should seek to push the onus of escalation – the burden of continuing and expanding the war – onto Beijing’s shoulders. In essence, the point would be to overcome China within the confines of a limited, bounded conflict and then force Beijing to bear the risk, the opprobrium, and the culpability for expanding or intensifying the war. Given that Beijing would have abundant reasons to want to limit any such war with the United States and its allies and partners, shifting the burden of worsening a conflict onto the PRC would be a very significant strategic gain. In such an event, the United States would not need to rely on Beijing’s good graces for it to make such a decision. Rather, the United States’ own reserve capabilities – including, in the extreme case, its nuclear forces – would form a powerful deterrent against China seeking to escalate its way out of defeat.

This logic dictates that the United States think carefully about the parameters it would promote and agree to in the event of conflict with China. These parameters would need to be plausibly acceptable boundaries of limitation not only for Washington but also for Beijing while at the same time allowing the United States and its allies and partners to exploit their advantages.

But this logic also has significant implications for the kind of military force the United States should procure and the kind of doctrine and strategies it should develop. In particular, it means having a joint force that can prevail in a limited context – that does not, in other words, rely on escalation that would be foolhardy or ineffective – while retaining substantial advantages should the conflict escalate to higher, wider, or more intense levels of conflict. This latter part is crucial not only in deterring Chinese escalation but also because the United States itself may be the party that wants to escalate, especially as China grows stronger.

This logic dictates that the United States should develop a joint force that can contest and, ideally defeat, Chinese aggression through a “direct defense” approach; supplement or backstop that direct approach with indirect strategies; and that together is designed to allow the United States to favorably control escalation in the event of conflict. Ideally, such a force would be able to meet any Chinese action at or near the point of attack (for instance Taiwan or islands in the East China Sea), defeat the attack using conventional forces acting solely or at least overwhelmingly within a clearly understandable and justifiable geographical boundary (one that might well include Chinese territory, given its vital role in such an attack), and deter China from escalating its way out of failure through the joint force’s evident ability to meet such escalation with an appropriate combination of military counteraction and cost-infliction. Alternatively, in the event that China gains the upper hand over contingencies about which the United States cares, such a force should be designed to expand or shift the boundaries of a war to a level at which U.S. forces have the upper hand but at which the United States can still plausibly seek to limit further escalation. In

⁷ Such boundaries might and likely would be defined in terms not only of geography but also or alternatively in terms of classes of weaponry, intensity of conflict, types of targets, and so forth.

this eventuality, U.S. reserve (including nuclear) forces should provide a credible block to Chinese counter-escalation and in particular to unchecked Chinese aggression, especially should U.S. and allied defenses break down over truly crucial interests.

Based on this logic, it is clear that the United States would be ill-advised to rely exclusively or primarily on “indirect” approaches such as blockades or the like to deter or defeat Chinese military action in the region. Such forces would be ill-suited for enabling the United States to prevail in limited wars with China because they would likely be either insufficient to coerce Beijing into backing down or too escalatory. In the former possibility, indirect approaches would cause pain for Beijing but would be too mild to persuade it to back away from the military action – say, over Taiwan or islands in the East or South China Seas – that had prompted the United States to resort to them. Alternatively, if such indirect approaches were sufficiently harsh, they would risk broadening or expanding conflicts that could otherwise remain limited, an expansion that could very well undermine U.S. interests in containing such a war. Indeed, precisely by reducing the flexibility of the U.S. joint force, reliance on such approaches might actually spur escalation. More realistically, plausible U.S. leaders would likely be loath to implement such escalatory strategies and China would be able to shape its strategic and military actions to avoid triggering them.

At the same time, such indirect approaches should be vital *options and components* in U.S. strategy. For instance, the United States should aggressively exploit the possibilities for indirect strategies such as blockade, maritime denial, and the like, and the United States might well elect to implement these options in the event of conflict. The crucial point is that these strategies should not be the *exclusive* or even necessarily primary mode by which the United States would respond to Chinese military action in maritime Asia. Rather, the force the United States should seek to develop should focus firstly on seeking to defeat such Chinese action directly and rely on these indirect strategies as supplements to such direct responses or as methods of escalation.

So what does developing such a joint force mean in practice?

Firstly it means continuing to seek to develop a “direct defense” force that can prevail over China in a limited war. As noted above, this effort is already receiving substantial merited attention, both within the Pentagon and from outside experts.⁸ The Department of Defense should be

⁸ For superb statements for why the United States should maintain a “direct defense” posture in the Western Pacific and strong ideas for how to do so, see 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): 115-149; David Ochmanek, “Sustaining U.S. Leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region: Why a Strategy of Direct Defense Against Antiaccess and Area Denial Threats is Desirable and Feasible,” (RAND, March 2015), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE142/RAND_PE142.pdf; and James B. Thomas and Evan B. Montgomery, “Developing a Strategy for a Long-Term Sino-American Competition,” in *Competitive*

encouraged and supported in this endeavor, including with respect to initiatives vital for fielding an effective direct defense force such as the next-generation bomber, upgrades to the joint force's C4ISR architecture, an active submarine building program, the development of a more resilient and adaptable basing structure in the Asia-Pacific, providing the joint force with higher stocks of munitions, among others. The Department should be particularly encouraged to exploit the opportunities afforded by new technologies, which it is already doing through its "Offset Strategy" initiative. Given organizational conservatism, however, efforts to take advantage of the potential of new technologies, particularly unmanned and autonomous systems and novel approaches to missile defense, deserve particular backing.⁹ The United States will clearly need to find asymmetric ways to "offset" Chinese advantages in proximity and mass, and thus it is vital that the Department effectively exploit the potential latent in technology and in its effective integration into highly-skilled and relatively adaptable U.S. military organizations.

Sustained support for these programs and initiatives is crucial. But it is not enough. For these steps need to be accompanied by the Department's development and integration of capabilities, strategies, and doctrines for effectively fighting limited wars. This is a problem because the Pentagon – and much of the American policymaking and policy-influencing community – have become accustomed to the United States being able to wage wars in which it alone can set the parameters of conflict. A full generation after the collapse of the Soviet threat and after a period in which most U.S. military attention went towards "rogue" states and terrorist or insurgent groups, much of the U.S. military and the American defense policy world have lost mastery of or even much familiarity with what it means to face a highly-capable opponent able to contest seriously U.S. dominance of the battlespace.

Yet China will increasingly present precisely this kind of challenge. It is therefore critical that the Department work to develop a much firmer understanding of limited war, escalation, brinkmanship, and related concepts and acculturate its officers and officials, especially those in the rising generation, with these concepts and their implications. This is vital because the capabilities the Department procures, the way it plans to use them to fight wars against China (or, for that matter, Russia), and the objectives it seeks to attain – all of these must be determined in light of the reality that the United States will want, indeed will need, to keep the conflict limited. This reality has implications for what kind of weapons the Department buys and what

Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice, ed. Thomas Mahnken, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012), 257-274.

⁹ On this point, see Robert O. Work and Shawn Brimley, "20YY: Preparing for War in the Robotic Age," (Center for a New American Security, January 2014), http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_20YY_WorkBrimley.pdf; Paul Scharre, "Robotics on the Battlefield, Part 1: Range, Persistence and Daring," (Center for a New American Security, May 2014), http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_RoboticsOnTheBattlefield_Scharre.pdf; and Paul Scharre, "Robotics on the Battlefield, Part 2: The Coming Swarm," (Center for a New American Security, October 2014), http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_TheComingSwarm_Scharre.pdf.

characteristics these weapons should have, what kinds of war plans it develops, and what kinds of warfighting doctrines it trains its personnel to be ready to implement. Importantly, it does not always mean excluding or disfavoring capabilities or approaches that risk escalation – since risking escalation is often necessary to prevail in a limited conflict – but it does mean that those risks must be understood and accounted for. In simpler terms, *if the Department builds a joint force that cannot be used well in a limited war, it will have failed to build the right force for the coming competition with China and will have significantly damaged the nation's deterrent power.*

Modernization of U.S. nuclear forces should play a crucial role in this effort to build a joint force designed for prevailing in a plausible conflict with China. Nuclear forces will form a vital component of an effective limited war strategy for the United States by deterring Chinese resort to nuclear escalation of its own or, in the event the United States loses the conventional upper hand, by deterring dramatic forms of PRC non-nuclear escalation. To perform these missions most effectively, however, the U.S. nuclear force needs to be adapted to the emerging strategic and military-technological context. This means that, while the U.S. nuclear deterrent should continue to be developed and postured to deter general nuclear war, it should also have greater capabilities for discrimination and control such that it can be employed in tailored fashion. In other words, the U.S. nuclear force too should be designed to be better at limited war than its Chinese opposite.

Accordingly, the U.S. nuclear force should be adapted to have as much discrimination and tailoring potential as possible, since the more it exhibits these qualities the more effective it would be in a limited war scenario. And, given that the parameters of such a limited war cannot be precisely envisioned in advance, this means that the U.S. nuclear force should be endowed with as much controllability and flexibility as possible in terms of level of destructiveness, accuracy, radioactive release, utility against various targets, and redundancy. Such versatility would give the United States a greater ability to employ these forces to gain escalation advantage over China in the event of a conflict – and, more to the point, demonstrate to China the futility and great danger of electing to use its own nuclear weapons or cross other U.S. red lines.¹⁰

U.S. arms control policy and commitments should also be adapted to conform to this emerging strategic environment and the approaches it will require from the United States. Broadly speaking, the United States should pursue an active arms control agenda with China for a number of reasons. Such an active approach can, done well, reduce the incentives to and

¹⁰ For a further elaboration of this argument, see Elbridge A. Colby, “The Need for Limited Nuclear Options” in *Challenges in U.S. National Security Policy: A Festschrift Honoring Edward L. (Ted) Warner*, ed. David Ochmanek and Michael Sulmeyer, (RAND, 2014), 141-168, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/corporate_pubs/CP700/CP765/RAND_CP765.pdf. For further suggestions for what this type of approach should mean for the U.S. nuclear force, see the author's contribution to the forthcoming report on future nuclear strategy and posture in Clark Murdock, Samuel Brannen, and Angela Weaver, “Project Atom,” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2015), unpublished paper.

pressures for war and thus contribute to U.S. and allied security. It can also demonstrate the genuineness of U.S. interest in reducing such risks, which is crucial for maintaining the legitimacy of the U.S. posture in the region among allies, partners, “fencesitters,” and other influential countries. It is important that the United States be seen as meaningfully seeking to control and reduce risks. An arms control agenda is one of the best ways to do so. Even if it bears little fruit in terms of concrete agreements with the PRC, a genuine effort will still be useful in demonstrating U.S. good will and sense of responsibility.

But such an arms control agenda should be strategically sensible rather than oriented towards pursuit of implausible and likely unattractive goals like a world without nuclear weapons. Accordingly, U.S. arms control vis a vis China should be oriented at promoting stability, developing mutual confidence where appropriate, and enabling each side’s better understanding of the other’s strategic approach and intentions to lessen the chances of misunderstanding or miscalculation.¹¹

In the particular case of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the United States should closely examine the implications this Treaty has on the U.S. ability to deploy the military capabilities it needs for effective deterrence and defense in the Asia-Pacific. This means that the Department of Defense should be tasked with rigorously studying whether the United States would materially benefit from being able to deploy INF-accountable systems in the region and, if so, to what degree. While the United States benefits from Russian adherence to the INF Treaty, those benefits must be weighed against the costs of U.S. adherence with respect to the U.S. military position in the Asia-Pacific (and elsewhere). While the United States has historically been able to meet its military requirements in what is, after all, a primarily maritime region with air and sea forces not covered by INF, that could change. If the United States does determine that INF-accountable forces would be important for its posture in maritime Asia, this determination should materially influence decisions as to whether to continue adhering to the Treaty, decisions that would of course also be appropriately influenced by Russian violations of the accord, allied perspectives, and a range of other factors.¹²

Working more effectively with allies and partners will play a particularly important role in developing the kind of strategic and military posture required to balance a rising China in the Asia-Pacific. Given the scale of the PRC’s growth and of the resources it can dedicate to its military, the United States and its allies and partners in the region need to cooperate more and

¹¹ For further elaboration of this, see Elbridge Colby, Abraham Denmark, and John Warden, “Nuclear Weapons and U.S.-China Relations: A Way Forward,” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2013), <http://csis.org/publication/nuclear-weapons-and-us-china-relations>.

¹² Elbridge Colby, “The Real Trouble with Russia: Moscow Might Have Violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty—Here’s How to Respond,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141106/elbridge-colby/the-real-trouble-with-russia>.

integrate their forces and plans more effectively. No longer will they be able to afford the luxury of relying only on U.S. forces.

This has different implications for different allies and partners. In the cases of Japan and Australia, for instance, both of which can deploy forces of the highest caliber and are relatively aligned with Washington on regional issues, the United States should continue to look to integrate with their forces as much as possible to share burdens as well as to capitalize on opportunities for specialization. For countries such as the Philippines, on the other hand, the United States should look to increase their capacity for self-defense and to be able to contribute to hampering China's ability to effectively project military force in the region. Finally, in the case of countries less inclined to overt cooperation with Washington, the United States should look to help orient and build their military capabilities to present greater difficulties for China's ability to use its military power in the region.¹³

Thus, while the United States should not place itself in a position in which its plans would be nullified by an ally's refusal to join in a military campaign, it nonetheless should look to help Asian states concerned by China's growing military power and increasing assertiveness to build up the capabilities to deter and, of if necessary hamper, delay, or even block an attempt by Beijing to employ or project this power.

Conclusion

Needless to say, these are only a few of the issues the United States will confront in the face of China's growing military power. But they hopefully offer a useful framework for understanding the implications of this tremendous fact and what the United States might do to mitigate its deleterious effects.

Some, however, will question the advisability of taking the steps recommended here in light of China's future – some will say because China will grow too strong and thus that such efforts will be futile and fecklessly provocative, others because the PRC will be too weak, and thus that such efforts will be unnecessary and wasteful. But it is reasonable to judge that seeking to develop the kind of force and overall posture recommended here is responsible because, while doing so will be neither easy nor cheap, such an effort will pay off regardless of China's future trajectory. If China's economic growth flags somewhat and regresses to the norm of middle-income countries, as seems most probable, then in a long-term competition with this still waxing but more "normal" China a stronger United States with a highly capable force adapted for a major but limited war with China will be well-positioned to favorably sustain its strategic posture in Asia and retain the advantage across substantial and important swathes of the military balance. Such a

¹³ For more on this, see the forthcoming CNAS report, Ely Rather et al., "More Willing and Able: Charting China's International Security Activism," (Center for a New American Security, 2015), unpublished paper.

posture will serve as a crucial balancer to China's growing power and as a major shaper of its strategic behavior. If China, however, is able to sustain exceptionally high levels of economic growth and dedicate ever larger portions of its growing resources to its military, then the United States will, by having made its defense posture stronger and more credible, put itself in a bargaining position of strength rather than weakness vis a vis a mightier Beijing. This will enable the United States to press for better strategic and political terms in the Asia-Pacific in the event China evolves into a hegemon or quasi-hegemon. And if China's economic growth radically slows and/or it elects to slow or halt its military buildup, then the United States may have overspent on strategic insurance, but it will have fielded a military that will continue to dominate the world strategic landscape and thus enable the United States to continue playing its role as benevolent primate.¹⁴

In other words, our maintaining a position of military strength and, ideally, advantage makes sense across the spectrum of likely futures for China. Of course we cannot know the future with any confidence, but what seems clear is that we will not regret being stronger in it. But this is easier said than done, and we do not help our cause by delaying or equivocating.

¹⁴ For a further elaboration of this argument, see Elbridge Colby, "Pushing Back on China: A Rational Approach," *The Strategist: The Australian Policy Institute Blog*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/author/elbridge-colby/>.