

Bottom Line Up Front

- 1) The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has been using incremental strategies to reach its goals in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Taiwan Strait areas. These approaches have been more successful in the South China Sea than in the East China Sea or Taiwan Strait areas. At the same time, developments in the environment surrounding these hotspots are encouraging a dangerous combination of Chinese confidence and insecurity. Chinese strategists believe that the overall balance in Comprehensive National Power (CNP) has been shifting in favor of the PRC, but the PRC’s economic growth has slowed, increasing the chances of domestic unrest, which Chinese elites fear could be exploited by external rivals. We should be concerned, therefore, that the PRC, impatient with incremental approaches and facing internal political pressure, may over time feel both more capable of executing a *coup de main* and more compelled to execute a *coup de main* in a maritime hotspot area. In other words, US general deterrence (i.e., deterring an adversary in general from considering the use of force as an option) may fail.
- 2) Chinese defense scholars have written that 21st century “island wars” will be “global.” They believe that such conflicts can nonetheless be limited, and that they can use active or operational deterrence measures – including displays and, if necessary, exercises of force – to keep the United States out or to contain its involvement. While the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) could make a maritime hotspot conflict global through attacks on US logistics nodes, sustainment forces, ports or other facilities far from the mainland, the notion that such a war could be kept limited is likely wrong. Technological and political factors have increased the likelihood that PRC aggression would trigger rapid escalation and prolonged warfare between the United States and the PRC. Modern defense technologies that allow for precision strikes in multiple domains also allow for attacks to penetrate more deeply into an adversary’s society and for escalation to proceed more quickly and to higher levels than has been the case in recent decades. For reasons of interest bound up with identity, moreover, the United States is unlikely to accede to an attempted Chinese *fait accompli*.
- 3) While the United States can and should think about options to strengthen our general deterrence capabilities, we have limited influence over Chinese CNP calculations and domestic developments within the PRC that could lead to a breakdown of general deterrence. Accordingly, we must also think about how to restore immediate deterrence (i.e., deterring an adversary from using force in a particular confrontation) in a crisis. Chinese military writings offer guidance on how PRC defense experts think about deterrence that inform my recommendations on pp. 11-14 below – including the idea that the United States must be prepared to execute unusual military actions that disrupt Chinese plans upon warning that a PRC attack may be imminent.

¹ I thank my colleagues Tom Ehrhard, Phil Pournelle, and Steve Rosen of the Long Term Strategy Group for comments on earlier drafts of this testimony. All errors or omissions are my own.

Introduction

Thank you to the members of the US-China Economic & Security Review Commission for the opportunity to testify once again on some of the most consequential defense policy questions facing the United States:

- *How would hotspot conflicts in the East China Sea (Senkakus), South China Sea, and Taiwan Strait likely affect US interests or draw the United States into a contingency?*
- *What would US involvement in a hotspot contingency look like?*
- *What options could the US Department of Defense explore to de-escalate or deter a conflict that do not degrade the US ability to respond if necessary? Discuss a range of potential operational responses for each hotspot, and identify any constraints that US allies, partners, or friends within the region may place on US operations.*

The East and South China Sea and Taiwan Strait “hotspots” matter not only because of the increasing potential for escalation from a crisis to war but also because of the competitive dynamics surrounding them in peacetime. These dynamics affect our relations with key allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). My testimony will address the three sets of questions posed by the Commission (in the above bullet points), concerning the interests at stake in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Strait, the character of a potential contingency in one of those areas and US involvement in it, and options for the United States to deter or de-escalate a crisis. I will try to incorporate not only a US perspective but also Chinese and regional perspectives in addressing the first two questions. For the third question, because my analysis indicates the increasing likelihood of a failure of general deterrence (i.e., deterring an adversary in general from considering the use of force as an option) for reasons outside US control, I conclude with suggestions for restoring immediate deterrence (i.e., deterring an adversary from using force in a particular confrontation) in a crisis. These suggestions are based on insights drawn from a close study of Chinese military texts such as *Studies of Island Operations* (Academy of Military Science, 2002), *The Science of Campaigns* (National Defense University, 2006 edition), and *The Science of Military Strategy* (Academy of Military Science, 2013 edition).

Interests at Stake

Would we fight World War III over “a bunch of rocks or reefs?” That is the admirably vivid question that is often posed regarding the US interest in the East and South China Seas. It is not the right question, however. The American interests at stake are more far-reaching but abstract, which unfortunately makes them harder to grasp. They include our interest in alliance commitments and in principles such as freedom of navigation, the peaceful settlement of international disputes, and free trade. It is important to note that these interests differ from those of the PRC and even of key allies in the region such as Japan, for which more direct concerns of national survival are implicated.

US Interests

The US alliance commitments that could be activated by maritime hotspot conflicts in East or Southeast Asia are strongest in the East China Sea. The United States has repeatedly clarified that the Senkaku islands are covered by its mutual security treaty with Japan. With regard to the Taiwan Strait, the United States remains obligated by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act to contribute to the maintenance of Taiwan’s

capacity for self-defense. In the South China Sea, the Philippines case is most ambiguous insofar as we have not clarified whether our treaty commitment to the defense of that country applies to disputed offshore islands, though it has been suggested that the Sierra Madre is covered by virtue of its being a commissioned ship. Domestic political developments in the Philippines have also created uncertainty about the future trajectory of its relations with the United States.

Those who question how such alliance commitments serve US interests may wish to recall that the commitments were established in the period following the conclusion of the Second World War, as the Cold War was beginning. The goal of US strategy was to set up a defense perimeter in Asia with forward deployed American military forces, to contain the spread of communism, protect liberal democracies, and ensure free trade, all of which was thought to reduce the chances of another world war started by an ideologically driven expansionist regime. By their original logic, then, US alliance commitments matter insofar as they act to provide the basis for mature diplomatic interchange, while preventing any ambitious would-be hegemon from destabilizing the region. Peace and commerce in East and Southeast Asia have in turn enabled tremendous growth and rising prosperity. Our commitments in the region also matter because of the potential effects in other theaters of our retreating from them there; successful Chinese aggression could be interpreted as a license for adventurism by authoritarian, coercive regimes elsewhere in the world.

For seven decades the United States has undertaken to defend not only alliance commitments but also a set of principles vital to preserving peace. Hotspot conflicts in the East China Sea, South China Sea, or Taiwan Strait would threaten these principles, including freedom of navigation, the settlement of international disputes by legal means, and free trade. Beijing could try to prevail in one of these disputes through a combination of threats and uses of force by PRC law enforcement, paramilitary, and/or military actors. If successful, Beijing would then impose control over the relevant maritime area, and if this were to go unchallenged, the area could eventually be considered de facto PRC territory. As this committee is well aware, Beijing's long-held view compromises freedom of navigation by giving the Chinese government the ability to regulate maritime traffic in waters that are now free and open, but to which the PRC believes it has "historic rights."² By definition the PRC would have achieved this position by means other than international arbitration, thus also compromising the principle of peaceful dispute resolution.

Freedom of navigation and recourse to international law to settle disputes underpin free trade, another institution that the United States has promoted since 1945. The PRC has not conformed to its obligations as a World Trade Organization member and clearly sees free trade as an opportunity to be exploited rather than an institution to be protected.³ Here again, Beijing's alternative perspective threatens the operation of a virtuous cycle over the last seven decades, whereby commerce has

² The "historic rights" rubric has been employed by Chinese legal theorists, or legal warfare ("lawfare") specialists, since 1998 in an attempt to justify and legitimize the PRC's longstanding perspective – see Zou Keyuan, "Historic Rights in International Law and in China's Practice," *Ocean Development and International Law*, 32:149-168, 2001. For more on the historical roots of the PRC's perspective, see Hungdah Chiu, "China and the Law of the Sea Conference," *Occasional Papers/Reprint Series in Contemporary Asian Studies*, 4: 1981 (41).

³ Research and analysis by the US-China Economic & Security Review Commission itself supports this claim, as does the record of Chinese leadership statements dating back to the early 1980s articulating a PRC strategy for exploiting access to international resources and markets without opening up domestically.

facilitated increasing prosperity, which in turn has contributed – at least until now – to the maintenance of peace.

Given the high stakes on both sides, if the PRC prevailed in a hotspot conflict, the post-conflict international environment would differ significantly from today's. Tensions would rise globally as the world devolved into blocs, and Beijing would acquire leverage over the decisions of the defeated state and of others who feared suffering its fate.

Note what is and is not included in the list of US principles at stake. While the principle of free trade is a primary US interest, trade *per se* is not. The gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States is largely (approximately 75%) based on our domestic economy; of the roughly 25% of GDP that comes from trade, Asia trade only accounts for about a quarter of that (i.e., US trade with the region accounts for only 1/16th – 0.0625 – of our GDP). While an abrupt cessation of that trade would be globally and regionally disruptive, the United States could endure it without suffering a major reduction in our standard of living. As we will see below, the same is not true of Japan.

PRC Interests

Longstanding US interests in East and Southeast Asia are now under pressure due to the alternative perspective and behavior of the PRC. Over the several decades of its rise, Beijing has sought to increase its economic, political, and military influence in order to pursue a revisionist agenda informed by its particular history and the character of the PRC regime. We often hear about the \$5 trillion in trade that passes through the South China Sea,⁴ the sizeable oil and gas deposits thought to lie under both the East and the South China Seas, and the importance of local fish as a protein source. All of these factor in to Chinese interests but are subordinate to the PRC's security concerns.

The PRC sees the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and South China Sea as forming a continuous, contested body of water critical to Chinese security. Historically, attacks from the sea have struck vital military facilities, population centers, and economic interests on the Chinese coast, while seaborne invasions have repeatedly penetrated through Chinese rivers into the heart of the country. The 2013 edition of the Academy of Military Science's *Science of Military Strategy* cites Mao on this point: "From 1840 to the present day – more than 100 years – the Opium War, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, and the Eight-Power Allied Forces War of Invasion of China [of 1900] all made their way in from the sea."⁵ The culmination of the trend was the Japanese assault of 1937, during which the Japanese Third Fleet was based in Shanghai, from which Japanese troops moved up the Yangtze river, forcing the Nationalists to retreat and move their capital further and further inland.

From Beijing's perspective, the United States today is essentially threatening by virtue of:

- its size and military power,

⁴ This same number has been cited for more than five years (sometimes as \$5.3 trillion) – a period during which the value of global trade has actually fluctuated considerably – raising questions about its accuracy today. See Adm. Willard's 2011 statement for the earliest usage I can find, "Press Briefing by NSA for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes and Admiral Robert Willard, U.S. Pacific Command," Office of the Press Secretary, 13 November 2011, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/13/press-briefing-nsa-strategic-communications-ben-rhodes-and-admiral-rober>.

⁵ Shou Xiaosong et al., eds., *战略学* [*Science of Military Strategy*], (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), p. 209.

- the liberal democratic character of its political system,⁶
- its position on the PRC's flank, and
- its record of defeating the Soviet Union, along with subsequent regime change efforts.

Chinese defense white papers published bi-annually since 1998 consistently mention these factors more or less explicitly – key terms include “hegemonism,” “power politics,” “cold war mentality,” “alliances” or “blocs,” and “interventionism,” “interference,” and variants thereof. In complaints about our support for Taiwan, the United States is named outright, and in other contexts, we are referred to simply as a “great power,” “some power,” or a “certain power.” These other contexts include expressions of concern about our close relations with other states in the region, our advanced military capabilities and deployment patterns, and our purported influence over critical geographic areas and resources.⁷

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elites recognize the contributions the US role in facilitating the PRC's rise through the decades of regional influence mentioned above, but also through direct investment, technology transfer, trade, and even assistance to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) until the 1989 Tian'anmen Square crackdown.⁸ More generally, they appreciate that the PRC's success up to this point would not have been possible without the US military's guaranteeing peace and protecting commercial flows in the Asia-Pacific region. But Chinese defense intellectuals have also argued that the US role in securing the international order turned threatening at some point. For instance, Lt. Gen. Liu Yazhou of the PLA Air Force, who is also a princeling with a distinguished pedigree, homed in on the 2003 Iraq War in a 2005 interview:

When a nation grows strong enough, it practices hegemony. The sole purpose of power is to pursue even greater power. The last cornerstone of the 20th century international system had

⁶ While we do not intend it to be threatening, and while it is for the most part not organized by the US government, Americans' natural promotion of human rights, free speech, and freedom of religion strikes the CCP as state-sponsored meddling, or an effort to “Westernize and divide” or “Color Revolution”-ize the PRC, as discussed in the leaked party *Document No. 9* (translated into English at: <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>):

... the contest between infiltration and anti-infiltration efforts in the ideological sphere is as severe as ever, and so long as we persist in CCP leadership and socialism with Chinese characteristics, the position of Western anti-China forces to pressure for urgent reform won't change, and they'll continue to point the spearhead of Westernizing, splitting, and 'Color Revolutions' at China.

⁷ The concern about US or great-power dominance over critical geographic areas and resources is echoed in seminal Chinese military texts such as the 2013 edition of *战略学* [*Science of Military Strategy*], p. 80. The focus on control over choke points in this connection, along with the PRC's interest in disputed maritime territory and Taiwan, has generated a voluminous PLA literature on trends in island warfare. For instance, PLA Gen. (Ret.) Zhu Wenquan's three-volume study of island warfare begins with the assertion that “...85 countries in the world have disputes over more than 410 islands (peninsulas and reefs) in 83 places... [Thus,] island warfare is in progress.” Zhu Wenquan, *岛屿战争* [*On Island Warfare*], (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2014), p. 3.

⁸ For instance, on economic ties, see Julian Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2017); on security ties, in the context of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, see declassified National Security Decision Directive No. 11, 22 September 1981: <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-11.pdf>; on comprehensive US assistance, in the same context, see declassified National Security Decision Directive No. 140, 21 April 1984: <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-140.pdf>.

been the global collective security mechanism and international law as represented by the United Nations, an arrangement mainly initiated and established by the United States. The U[nited] S[tates] crushed this cornerstone through the war. It was the first war of the United States in ‘the New Empire Order’ and had great historical significance.⁹

Other Chinese defense intellectuals have alternatively cited the end of the Cold War, the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-96, the Belgrade embassy bombing of 1999, or the most recent Gulf War as the true turning point.¹⁰ A review of the history of Chinese anti-imperialist doctrine, together with the origins and content of Chinese nationalism,¹¹ over the past century-and-a-half suggests that elites in Beijing have chafed at the role of foreign powers in the Asia-Pacific for a very long time. What they have lacked until recently is the ability to act on this sentiment.

Over the past decade, Chinese strategists assess that the PRC’s capabilities have matured considerably. A calculation of Comprehensive National Power (综合国力 or CNP) published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences indicated that the PRC surpassed Japan in CNP as early as 2004,¹² and the 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* notes that the PRC became the “second-largest economy in the world” in 2010, concluding, “With the rapid escalation of its comprehensive national power, China’s ability to create a secure environment has continued to increase.”¹³ We can speculate that, as the United States is viewed as intrinsically threatening, once Chinese strategists calculate that the PRC is strong enough to manage its own sphere of influence, they will prefer to see us leave; or perhaps more precisely, the PRC will seek to supplant the United States as the arbiter of regional economic and security, under rules devised and enforced by Beijing.

The PRC’s interests thus have direct, perilous implications. Whereas Americans favor multilateral legal frameworks for resolving issues, the PRC prefers to deal bilaterally, so that it can exert superior power against smaller actors. CCP elites will not feel secure so long as the United States remains the guarantor of regional security and smaller countries in East and Southeast Asia do not defer to the PRC’s maritime claims.

Japan’s Interests

⁹ Dai Xu, “Interview with Lieutenant General Liu Yazhou of the Air Force of the People’s Liberation Army,” *Heartland: Eurasian Review of Geopolitics*, 2005 (No. 1), 5-32.

¹⁰ Alexander Nemets, “The Russian Origins of China’s Revolution in Military Affairs,” *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation, 24 June 2004; Zhang Wannian et al., *张万年传 [Biography of Zhang Wannian]*, (Beijing: Liberation Army Publishing House, 2011), pp. 414–421; Chang Xianqi et al., *Military Astronautics, 2nd Ed.*, (Beijing: National Defense Industries Press, 2005), p. 249, as cited in Dean Cheng, “Chinese Lessons from the Gulf War,” in Scobell, Lai, and Kamphausen, eds., *Chinese Lessons from Other People’s Wars* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 153-199, p. 164; Dingding Chen and Jianwei Wang, “Lying Low No More?: China’s New Thinking on the *Tao Guang Yang Hui* Strategy,” *China: An International Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2 (September 2011), 195-216.

¹¹ Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, “Tracing China’s Long Game Plan,” (review of *Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty-First Century* by Orville Schell and John Delury) *National Interest*, No. 127 (Sept./Oct. 2013), pp. 77-88; Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, “China’s Nationalist Heritage,” *The National Interest*, No. 123 (Jan./Feb. 2013), pp. 44-53.

¹² Zhimin Chen, “China’s Power from a Chinese Perspective (II),” in Jae Ho Chung, ed., *Assessing China’s Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 271-289, p. 276.

¹³ *战略学 [Science of Military Strategy]*, 2013, p. 78.

For Japan, our closest and most powerful ally in these maritime hotspot disputes, the interests at stake are arguably at least as grave as the PRC's. Japan is an island state with historical experience of maritime strangulation that imperiled its national survival. Chinese adventurism vis-à-vis the Senkakus would trigger memories of sequential World War II island campaigns leading to Japan's defeat. Even today, while the United States relies relatively little on trade, and even less on trade with Asia, trade constitutes almost 40% of Japan's GDP, of which trade within Asia constitutes the largest share. It would also be easy for Americans to underestimate the symbolic importance of the Senkakus, as the line about dying over a bunch of rocks encourages us to do. The Japanese government and people feel very strongly about their territorial integrity. This sensitivity is likely heightened by the fact that Chinese sources have been suggesting in quasi-official forums that the PRC's claims extend beyond the Senkakus to larger islands in the Ryukyus, to include Okinawa. From Japan's point of view, then, losing the Senkakus could trigger a catastrophic domino effect.

It seems clear that if the United States does not do what is necessary to reassure Tokyo, Japan may decide to act on its own. The PRC would likely view a more isolated Japan as vulnerable. Uncoordinated Japanese action could also complicate US efforts to work with both Japan and the Republic of Korea, or unnecessarily antagonize Russia. Most fundamentally, the US position as a central node in a web of regional alliances makes it easier for like-minded nations to cooperate and apply collective strength against de-stabilizing influences.

The Character of a Potential Contingency and US Involvement

If a maritime hotspot dispute in East or Southeast Asia were to escalate, what would be the character of the resulting contingency, and how might the United States respond? For various reasons, the PRC's opponents in these disputes do not have an interest in escalating,¹⁴ but all fear that Beijing may decide that it has such an interest. My argument is that, thanks to its perceived CNP buildup, the PRC will act more aggressively if confronted either with a vacuum that creates an opportunity or with setbacks that CCP elites believe they must reverse. Both conditions could trigger escalation. We can therefore divide the PRC's plausible behavior into two categories. First, if neither condition applies, the PRC could continue to execute the gradual, "silkworm" (蚕食) strategy of "nibbling away" at territory that it has applied in both the East and the South China Seas over the last decade.¹⁵ Second, in the face of either a perceived opportunity or serious challenges, the PRC could try to execute an overt, military *coup de main* to achieve a *fait accompli*. Given the proximity of forces from different sides operating in the hotspot areas, it is also possible that an unintended set of circumstances (e.g., a collision) could lead to escalation. At this point, however, such a contingency has become virtually foreseeable. Depending on

¹⁴ Taiwan is a liberal democracy that hopes to resolve its differences with the mainland peacefully; Japan possesses administrative control over the Senkakus and only fears being pressured or forced to cede it; the PRC's rivals in the South China Sea are smaller states that have doubts about whether the United States would come to their aid in the event of an armed clash with Beijing.

¹⁵ Most recent Chinese sources impute this strategy to rival claimants – e.g., in the South China Sea – as a pretext for the actions that the PRC has taken to advance its claims. Alastair Iain Johnston includes the silkworm approach in his typology of the seven strategies employed by Chinese historical rulers across China's dynastic period, describing it as "preventive colonization, or the gradual expansion of a state's security perimeter." (Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, [Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1998], p. 116, footnote 15.)

whether either of the above conditions applied, an accident could either be resolved quickly or trigger the PRC to execute a pre-planned set of options (described below) for achieving a *fait accompli*.

Prospects for the Silkworm Strategy vs. a *Coup de Main*

The logic of, and relevance of the United States to, the silkworm strategy is worth addressing before turning to the potential US role in a contingency triggered by more aggressive Chinese action. My source is again the 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, a publication of the Academy of Military Science in Beijing that is thought to be highly authoritative. According to the text, the gradualist approach has been enabled by the United States' inability to identify the PRC clearly as an opponent, which creates an opening for Chinese assertiveness short of the threshold of triggering a war.¹⁶ For as long as the United States is militarily dominant, the PRC has an incentive to try to keep Washington from perceiving it as an enemy. This can be accomplished by continuing to appear to be a source of economic opportunity and a partner in addressing global challenges such as terrorism and climate change.¹⁷ A corollary is that even while painting itself as the United States' partner, the PRC should also use threats to encourage US inaction in maritime hotspot disputes in East and Southeast Asia. The Chinese term for such behavior is "effective control" ("有效控制"), a form of active or operational deterrence that includes manipulating risk – e.g., by revealing capabilities designed to scare us – in peacetime, a crisis, or war. Through signaling escalation dominance and other efforts to manipulate the adversary's psychology, to include uses of force, Chinese strategists believe that they can induce the opponent to give up. With respect to these maritime hotspot disputes, moreover, the goal of effective control in peacetime is to induce rival claimants to "take into account China's will, security, and interests in their formulation of policies ... and activities."¹⁸ By achieving this kind of deference, the PRC can avoid having to impose its will through combat.

As the PRC's power grows, if it cannot succeed in securing disputed territory by nibbling away while implementing effective control in peacetime, it may elect to try a *coup de main*. The overt aggression that we most often consider vis-à-vis Taiwan may also apply to the East and South China Sea disputes. The latter theater offers some recent historical examples of Chinese island seizures – witness the PRC's 1974 Paracels and 1988 Spratlys battles against Vietnam, and the 1994 Mischief Reef occupation at the expense of the Philippines. These past cases could all have been motivated by a Chinese perception of a vacuum created by American retreat or relative indifference – i.e., by a shift in the balance of power favorable to the PRC. (In 1974, the United States had just left Vietnam; 1988 was a high point of US-PRC cooperation against the Soviet Union;¹⁹ and in 1994 the United States had recently been evicted from its bases in the Philippines.) It is not only confidence or opportunism that could motivate Chinese aggression. A compulsion to reverse incipient negative developments at home and abroad seem to underlie other historical Chinese uses of force – including the ambush of US forces in Korea in late 1950,

¹⁶ 战略学 [Science of Military Strategy], 2013, p. 72.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁸ 战略学 [Science of Military Strategy], 2013, pp. 110-117.

¹⁹ I.e., in that particular Cold War context, Beijing may have counted on the United States' prioritizing cooperation against the Soviets over punishing Chinese aggression against Vietnam. Hui Wang, "U.S.-China: Bonds and Tensions," in Shuxun Chen and Charles Wolf, Jr., eds., *China, the United States, and the Global Economy*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 257-288, p. 262.

the attack on Soviet forces at Zhenbao island in 1969, and the invasion of Vietnam in 1979.²⁰ In other words, the perception of a shift in trends, whether favorable or unfavorable, may drive the Chinese to act at a time when we do not expect it.

What does this suggest about the likelihood of a Chinese *coup de main* in each maritime hotspot area? Beijing may assess that the gradualist approach has been working to date in the South China Sea – and has afforded the United States what Chinese strategists might consider to be a face-saving way to avoid intervening to repulse Chinese advances. The jury is still out on the efficacy of the silkworm strategy in the East China Sea, however. Tokyo clearly feels pressure from the accretion of Chinese forces seeking to challenge its administrative control of the Senkakus, but there are signs that this pressure is generating countervailing responses – including more Japanese “gray zone” capacity, increased cooperation with the United States in this area, and the potential Japanese acquisition of new precision strike capabilities. Whether and to what degree Beijing perceives these developments as a setback is not yet clear. The Taiwan case may be the most disappointing for Beijing. The candidate of the incumbent, mainland-leaning KMT party lost to the independence-leaning DPP candidate in the 2016 presidential election. Perhaps more troubling for Chinese strategists, insofar as they hoped to gradually “re-integrate” Taiwan through closer economic and social ties, the effort seems to have backfired. Public opinion polls show that increased cross-Strait contact in recent years has either encouraged or at least not prevented the cementing of a separate Taiwanese identity. Residents of the island feel more and more Taiwanese and identify less and less with the PRC.²¹

Given the weight that Chinese planners apparently assign to CNP calculations, the likelihood of a turn to more overt aggression in any one of the maritime hotspot disputes seems to be increasing. The PRC perceives its strength to be growing relative to rivals and to the United States. The trigger for aggression could therefore come from the perception of an opportunity – e.g., if the United States were either to withdraw or to seem to be dependent on the PRC for help in another area. But aggression could equally follow from the perception of a heightened threat – e.g., as a result of internal unrest within the PRC, increased regional capacity, or closer ties between the United States and the PRC’s rival claimants. In other words, the odds of aggression will go up if either a chance to secure the China Dream appears to be at hand or Beijing fears that it has a closing window to achieve it.²²

US Involvement

Pending the formulation of new operational concepts and perhaps also the development of new capabilities, the US response to a maritime hotspot contingency in the East or South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait would likely follow time-honored precedent. If the Chinese elect to persist with the gradualist approach, we may yet have some new opportunities to reinforce our ties with key allies, friends, and partners – by taking additional steps to strengthen their capabilities to defend themselves, and to work with the United States and with each other. If the Chinese decide to undertake a *coup de*

²⁰ Thomas J. Christensen, “Windows and War: Trend Analysis and Beijing’s Use of Force,” in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *New Directions in the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 2006) 50-85, p. 51.

²¹ Abraham Gerber, “Taiwanese Identity Reaches Record High,” *Taipei Times*, 28 May 2016.

²² We could also speculate about which rival PRC aggression would target, and whether a “kill the chicken to scare the monkey” logic might be employed.

main but fear a US intervention, their attack plan will likely incorporate counters for a predictable set of American responses. Either way, a change in the established pattern of US behavior is warranted.

To date, the US reaction to the Chinese silkworm strategy has been mixed. While Chinese encroachment in the East and South China Seas has engendered concerns in Washington and triggered restatements of our commitments to allies, regional actors – perhaps particularly in the South China Sea – remain skeptical of our resolve. Our military response seems to have struck these states as inconsistent or ambiguous.²³ Factors contributing to this impression may include:

- the perceived paucity of new initiatives associated with the “pivot” following its announcement in 2011 (beyond the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement [EDCA] with the Philippines and the Force Posture Initiatives with Australia);
- the perceived lack of a continuous, consistent US presence in terms of numbers of visible platforms doing patrols, along with ambiguous messaging about the character of those patrols (freedom of navigation vs. innocent passage);
- the lack of US-led enforcement of the Hague Arbitral Tribunal’s 2016 decision in favor of the Philippines;
- the inclusion of the PLA Navy (PLAN) in RIMPAC and other military-to-military engagements with the United States during the period of Chinese encroachment on disputed maritime territory and harassment of US vessels;
- US conduct in other theaters (e.g., Syria, Ukraine) that raised questions about our credibility as an ally – even in Japan, as the United States worked to improve and revise guidelines for defense cooperation; and
- the success of Chinese political warfare efforts to depict the United States as a transient actor in the region while emphasizing the PRC’s permanence – e.g., through statements to the effect that the United States is not really an “Asian power.”²⁴

Recent proposals to backstop the pivot – e.g., by pursuing a “hedgehog strategy” of strengthening US friends, partners, and allies in the region – would help counter some of the above concerns.

In the event of overt Chinese aggression to seize a disputed island or waterway, the PLA’s plan would take into account an anticipated US military response based on a well-developed understanding of our “shape” (形), or the way that we habitually react to security challenges. For the better part of the last century, US power projection has proceeded via a build-up of forces near the target on regional bases and aircraft carriers, followed by strikes on the target from predominantly short-range aircraft. That is our shape. In the face of North Korean and Chinese provocations in the mid-1990s, the United States repeatedly sent carriers to the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait to signal our displeasure and seriousness. Chinese defense scholars have also studied our adherence to the above pattern in the 1991 Gulf War and more recent conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia. Perhaps a sense of confidence about both their grasp of this approach and their counters to it led them to describe it for the first time in the 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*:

After the Cold War ended, the United States changed ‘forward defense’ into ‘forward presence’ and reduced its overseas garrisons, but it still ... maintained a certain number of forward

²³ LTSG Working Paper, Summer 2016.

²⁴ Ibid.

garrisons.... At the same time, it treated its strategic nuclear forces and conventional forces deployed in the homeland as a backup, using the [former] ... to prevent nuclear attacks and large-scale conventional attacks against the United States and its allies, and treating the conventional active-duty and reserve units stationed in the homeland as central reserves, with an emphasis on strengthening the[ir] quick reaction capabilities ... to deal with regional crises and conflicts; these would rely on strategic means of air and sea transportation for quick deployment as needed, reinforcing units stationed along the front lines at any time to strengthen their capacity for sustained operations.²⁵

Chinese defense scholars have clearly identified a stable pattern in US operations to respond to far-flung contingencies.²⁶ This has led to an impressive build-up of capabilities to oppose incoming US forces, including both intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets and ballistic and cruise missiles to attack mobile targets entering the region and the fixed bases that the United States would depend on within the region – from the DF-21 “carrier killer” to the DF-26 “Guam killer.”

With regard to maritime conflicts in particular, since at least 2002 PLA theorists have been arguing that future island wars will be “global” and “cross-domain” – i.e., not confined to the local beachhead.²⁷ This development is both enabled and required by the rise of long-range conventional precision strike capabilities. To prevent a US intervention, the PLA might execute cross-domain options to target US ports, logistics flows, and sustainment forces a long way from the PRC. These strikes would likely combine kinetic and non-kinetic attacks (e.g., cyber interference with, or degradation of, US Transportation Command to disrupt US deployment and logistics).

Beijing’s peacetime preparations for a maritime hotspot contingency have included cultivating political and economic relationships with countries in the South China Sea – presumably in part to reduce the chances that the United States will be able to use regional bases. These efforts may be paying off, at least in the Philippines. Just last month President Duterte announced his decision not to allow the United States to build on Bautista air base on Palawan. This was the facility included in the 2014 EDCA agreement that would have granted US forces nearest access to the disputed Spratlys. While there is no guarantee that the PRC will succeed over the long term in denying US access to regional bases, it is at least likely that through local intelligence sources, the PLA would have advance warning of incoming US forces. Such warning could give the Chinese the option of interfering with the American build-up before our forces are fully in place and prepared to fight. “Winning without fighting” remains the ideal, and the PLA’s counter-intervention forces are designed to function as part of an effective control effort to deter the United States from interceding on behalf of a regional partner or ally. But if that fails, the PLA could try to preemptively employ its arsenal to destroy the infrastructure and platforms essential to US power projection. The escalatory dangers of such a move, however, cannot be overstated. It is entirely possible that the US response would be overwhelming and devastating.

US Options to De-escalate/Deter

²⁵ 战略学 [Science of Military Strategy], 2013, p. 54.

²⁶ Phillip Pournelle, “When the US Navy Enters the Next Superbowl, Will It Play Like the Denver Broncos?” *War on the Rocks*, 30 Jan. 2015.

²⁷ Chen Xinmin (陈新民), Xu Guocheng (徐国成), and Luo Feng (罗锋), 岛屿作战研究 [Studies of Island Operations] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2002), p. 29.

The foregoing discussion has established that the factors driving potential future PRC aggression are largely outside US control. These factors include the PRC's economic growth and military build-up relative to other actors in the region and the United States. We are unlikely to try to curtail Chinese economic growth, and we have limited capacity to improve the economic position of other actors in the region. Our influence over their military modernization decisions is also limited. General deterrence would still be enhanced if we reduced our vulnerability to the PLA's counter-intervention forces by changing our "shape." Proposed new concepts for the US military range from options centered on destroying key targets on the mainland to options revolving around a distant blockade, or interdicting the PRC's sea lines of communication to prevent commercial ships from reaching the mainland.²⁸ While all of these concepts merit further exploration through research, analysis, games, and modeling and simulation, budgetary constraints and bureaucratic factors may inhibit our progress.

Meanwhile, PLA theorists increasingly emphasize the importance of controlling outlying maritime territory,²⁹ or "forward edge defense" (前沿防卫) in the parlance of the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*.³⁰ This notion is based on a view of the lessons of history and an assessment of the impact of technological trends on warfare, neither of which is subject to US control. In World War II, the Chinese suffered devastating losses at the hands of Japan, an island state that blockaded major Chinese cities, but then cheered on the Allied effort to recover Japanese-conquered outposts and eventually target the home islands. The outcome of the Chinese civil war, with the flight of the Nationalists to Taiwan and subsequent clashes over smaller islands in the Taiwan Strait, reinforced the importance of struggles both against and over island territories. Finally, Chinese defense intellectuals look back at the Cold War as a struggle over control of key maritime territory, including both islands and coastal bases, and continue to view regional developments through that prism. For instance, they see recent construction at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam and Subic Bay in the Philippines are transforming them into "two pliers stuck down the throat of China's southern-facing ocean routes." The US base at Diego Garcia, Indian position on the Andaman Islands, and US access to Changyi naval base in Singapore are also cause for concern, even as the PRC progresses with its base in Djibouti and forays into Sri Lanka and the Maldives.³¹ The past is present when it comes to the role of islands and other maritime territory in PLA geo-strategy.

At the same time, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy's* explication of "forward edge defense" is grounded in a discussion of contemporary high-tech trends featuring "informationized weapons and equipment" and the rise of "land, sea, air, space, and network multi-dimensional distant combat based on information systems." The discussion also repeatedly looks forward to a time when the PRC will have extended its "forward edge" into an "arc" shaped region (or regions) opposite the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean.³² This would seem to entail occupying positions in the "first island chain" and South China Sea. In a more explicitly offensive vein, the text stresses:

²⁸ Mike Pietrucha, "Strategic Architectures," *Leading Edge: Airpower in Theory and Practice*, 4 August 2015.

²⁹ Zhu Wenquan, op cit.

³⁰ 战略学 [*Science of Military Strategy*], 2013, pp. 104-106.

³¹ For instance, Hu Xin [胡欣], "The Resurrection of Cold War Military Bases: Stumbling Blocks to China's Maritime Strategies," ["复活的冷战基地:中国海上战略通道的拦路虎"], *Contemporary Military Affairs*, 9 (2015).

³² 战略学 [*Science of Military Strategy*], 2013, p. 106, 108.

... in terms of the Taiwan issue, East China Sea issue, South China Sea issue, and southwest border and territorial dispute ... we cannot wait for the enemy to attack us.... Therefore, at the same time as our military persists in subduing an opponent only after the enemy has attacked, we place strategic attack as an important operational category of vigorous defense.³³

As mentioned above, a decision that such a strategic attack was necessary could be driven by a downturn in the PRC economy or some other negative domestic development well outside the control of the United States. Beijing might nonetheless blame the United States and/or other outside parties for an internal crisis, and CCP elites might well also fear that American or other foreign forces would seek to exploit or exacerbate the domestic situation. All of this suggests that it will be difficult for the United States to deter PRC aggression once its CNP calculations reach a certain threshold or in the event of a major internal setback. General deterrence is likely to break down, in other words.

The prospects for restoring immediate deterrence look brighter, based on PLA writings on island warfare published by both the Academy of Military Science and the National Defense University in Beijing. These works stress that island campaigns require meticulous, lengthy planning, which creates an opening for an adversary to interfere.³⁴ Specifically, 21st-century island warfare operations will be complex and joint, necessitating extensive advance preparation to execute. Substantial forethought and prior arrangements will also be required to ensure that such a joint force's logistical and sustainment needs are met at a distance from the mainland.³⁵ Under these conditions, "the threat of a powerful enemy intervening" might deter the PRC from attacking a weaker island:

A strong enemy, in order to ruin the propensity of things for a landing, and in order to interfere with preparations, may toward the landing conflict institute provocations or military strikes, though of a small force level, of a short time, and of limited objectives, in order to avoid escalation to a larger scale of conflict.³⁶

A similar point is attributed to Mao's Deputy Commander of the Third Field Army, Li Yu, a veteran of the PRC's failed efforts to dislodge Nationalist forces from Jinmen, Zhoushan, and Dengbu islands in 1949, who is said to have stated:

...[F]or modern warfare, especially the large-scale naval joint operations that our military is not skilled at, operational preparations are more important than grasping combat opportunities. An extra share of victory comes with an extra share of preparation. If there is no absolute assurance, we should not readily launch attacks and would rather delay for some time.³⁷

³³ 战略学 [Science of Military Strategy], 2013, p. 107.

³⁴ 战略学 [Science of Military Strategy], 2013, p. 115.

³⁵ Zhang Yuliang et al., eds., 战役学 [The Science of Campaigns], (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2006), pp. 506-507.

³⁶ Studies of Island Operations [岛屿作战研究], p. 31.

³⁷ Selected Works of Li Yu, Volume 3, (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2004), p. 51, as cited in 战略学 [Science of Military Strategy], 2013, pp. 115-116.

The PLA's historical experiences with the fragility of island offensives thus reinforce its insistence on full control as a prerequisite for action, which presents opportunities for immediate deterrence.

The implication is that if the United States had warning, it could disrupt a planned operation through, for instance, unexpected visits to or rotations through non-typical access points (e.g., civilian airfields and ports), snap exercises in the region, and/or unexpected displays of new capabilities. Such capacity revelation, in turn, could be accomplished through a leak, a test, or the use of a new system in an observable exercise.

While American analysts might naturally also be interested in exploring "off-ramps" as a way to de-escalate a crisis, there is no reason to think that such alternatives exist for restoring deterrence once Beijing has made a decision for aggression. There is no word for off-ramp in Mandarin. To the contrary, through concepts such as effective control and "war control" – an earlier term used in the 2001 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*³⁸ – the PLA will be seeking to encourage us to give up early in a conflict. Any efforts to offer off-ramps are likely to be interpreted in this context as a sign of weakness, encouraging the PLA to proceed with the execution of its plan.

The potential for restoring immediate deterrence thus rests on the US ability to gain warning of a PLA offensive – either independently or with help from local allies and partners – and to act on that warning in ways that the PRC does not expect. This, in turn, would seem to require access to new facilities in the region, subject to the permission of regional allies and partners. It could also require the possession of capabilities that the United States has concealed but can reveal at a critical moment.

Last but not least, to the degree that such immediate deterrence options seem unlikely to come together or to succeed, preparations for a potential protracted conflict with the PRC are warranted. Such preparations should include the development of forces to execute whichever of the aforementioned – or other, as-yet-undeveloped – new concepts the US military adopts to change our "shape" and reduce our vulnerability to Chinese counter-intervention capabilities. Mobilization and civil defense planning, along with measures to offset the disruption of our trade with the PRC, should also be undertaken. Beyond providing us with a kind of insurance policy, all of these steps would be useful to enhance general deterrence and thereby reduce the likelihood that they would ever need to be used in a conflict.

³⁸ Peng Guangqian, Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy*, English translation of 2001 Chinese-language edition, (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2005), pp. 197-212.