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China's Military Modernization Program

Trends and Implications

Dr. Oriana Skylar Mastro
Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute
Assistant Professor of Security Studies, Georgetown University

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Chinese Military Activities and Progress in the People's Liberation Army's Modernization in 2019

China's military modernization program has continued apace, with defense spending growing for the 24th consecutive year, making China the second-largest defense spender after the United States.[1] China spent an estimated $175.4 billion on defense in 2019, with funds going to personnel, training, and procurement.[2] The increase in resources and effort has resulted in more frequent, sophisticated, and multifaceted People's Liberation Army (PLA) presence and activities in the region and beyond. China's main line of effort remains centered on East Asia, and its concerns are over the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and Taiwan. Below I capture the major developments in China's regional activities with a focus on the South China Sea and China's military presence beyond East Asia, as well as address recent developments in the Sino-Russian relationship and the publication of the 2019 Chinese Defense White Paper.

Regional Activities

Taiwan is the driving scenario for the PLA—in its training, procurement, reforms, and reorganization. Most Chinese military developments have implications for Taiwan. All of the Chinese navy's platforms, both undersea and surface, could be used to coerce, blockade, attack, or invade Taiwan. China currently has the largest navy in the world, with 300 ships consisting of aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes, submarines, and amphibious assault ships. The construction of the Type 095s nuclear attack submarine, which began in 2017, and the first Type 055 Nanchang destroyers that China will likely put in service this year could be useful to blockade Taiwan.[3] The Chinese Air Force is also developing a new strategic stealth bomber called the Xian H-20. The H-20 will join the J-20 fighters, Y-20 airlifters, and Z-20 helicopters in the PLA Air Force's "20" series of new aircraft. Many observers believe the "20" means they will be in service around the year 2020.[4]

Chinese military improvements are especially concerning given China's increasingly strident rhetoric over Taiwan. In his New Year's Day speech, Xi Jinping warned Taiwan that unification is the ultimate goal of any talks over its future and any efforts by the island to assert full independence would be met by armed force.[5] Based on this and subsequent speeches, it seems that Xi demands concrete progress toward reunification, though it is unclear exactly what that means. At the very least, China probably wants to restart bilateral talks and thus hopes that the political party in Taiwan that is more amenable to this path, the Kuomintang, will win the presidency in 2020.

In the meantime, China has been conducting military exercises of greater sophistication and scope, partly as a show of force. In March 2019, two Chinese PLAAF J-11 fighter jets crossed the Taiwan Strait "median line" for the first time since 2011. This move was quickly denounced by the Taiwanese government, which called it "reckless and provocative."[6] Taiwan President Tsai later warned that Taiwan would "forcefully expel" PLA warplanes the next time they crossed the median line.[7] In May, the 74th Group Army of the PLA conducted a maritime exercise that included the ZTD-05s amphibious assault vehicle. The exercise was conducted, according to Chinese state media, to prove that the PLA was "well positioned to deal with Taiwan secessionists and potential island disputes."[8] Then, in July, after Taiwan agreed to a $2.2

billion arms deal with the US, China once again conducted an exercise in the Taiwan Strait that state media reported as being a "warning" to Taiwan secessionists.[9]

While Taiwan continues to be the focus of the PLA, there have also been significant relative improvements in Chinese military posture in the South China Sea in recent years. Through misinterpretation and manipulation of international law, coupled with coercive diplomacy and military intimidation, China is hoping to gain de facto control over the South China Sea. This would give China the military advantage in the first island chain, increasing the likelihood that it could prevail in contingencies over Taiwan and against other claimants such as the Philippines (a US ally) in the South China Sea. It would also give China significant leverage over other countries that rely on free access to the South China Sea for energy and their economic well-being.

On the military side, Beijing is positioning itself in a way that weakens conventional US deterrence. China wants the ability to deny foreign military vessels and aircraft access to the sea and airspace over the South China Sea. It has been making progress toward this goal by building bases in the South China Sea, specifically on Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs in the Spratlys (known as the Big 3). All these bases will have approximately 10,000-foot runways, and the airfield support facilities (including reinforced hangars) to accommodate fighters, bombers, tankers, large transport, patrol airborne early warning, and aircraft refueling.[10] China's largest island in the Paracels, Woody Island, is also China's largest military outpost in the South China Sea. China has developed airstrips and port facilities and placed permanently stationed military personnel and temporarily deployed fighters, surface-to-air missiles, and anti-ship cruise missiles on the island.[11] In March 2019, it was reported that China was developing an island city on Woody Island with the intention of transforming the island into a "national key strategic service and logistics base."[12] Since most of the militarization had occurred previously, there was little movement of equipment in 2019; China placed J-10 fighters on Woody Island and extended its radar capabilities on the island.[13]

China has also been increasing its exercise tempo in these waters. In February 2019, the PLAN conducted a month-long series of drills in the South China Sea, which included tests of PLA C2 systems, PLARF missile defense systems, repelling vessels, and live-fire exercises.[14] These exercises were reported to have tested the PLA's wartime command and defense systems in the South China Sea. On July 3, 2019, the US DOD confirmed that China had conducted a series of anti-ship ballistic missile tests in the South China Sea around the Spratly Islands. These missile tests were the first known time China's missiles had flown over these waterways, as previous missile tests were conducted primarily over China's mainland. INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Davidson confirmed a few days later that the missiles fired included a new submarine-launched anti-ship ballistic missile called the JL-3, which has a reported range that holds the entire United States at risk.[15] While the Pentagon has yet to confirm all the types of missiles tested, media reports suggest it is likely that they included the DF-21D, known as the carrier killer, and DF-26, which reportedly can reach Guam and accommodate two types of nuclear warheads and several types of conventional warheads.[16] The PLAAF carried out "combat condition" exercises with advanced Russian-built Su-35 fighter jets over the South China Sea the same month, including aircraft attacks on sea targets, fire-and-maneuver tactics, and nighttime operations.[17] Lastly, in August, China conducted a three-day training exercise near the Paracels

and blocked ships from entering three of the island's waterways during this exercise.[18] China has continued to deploy anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems to the Spratly Islands, including the YJ-12B land-based anti-ship missile to several outposts in the South China Sea.[19]

China also uses influence operations and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to its advantage.[20] Amid the ongoing tensions surrounding Chinese 5G technology and Huawei, China has issued warnings to countries such as Australia and New Zealand of the consequences of cutting deals with Huawei.[21] Moreover, in 2019 alone, China has rammed and sunk a Vietnamese fishing vessel near the Paracels and a Philippine fishing vessel near the Scarborough Shoal.[22] China has also deployed research vessels to hinder Malaysian and Vietnamese oil and gas drilling operations near the Spratlys.[23] China has been pushing for an agreement on the Code of Conduct (COC), likely a nonbinding document that would however commit Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries to managing the South China Sea dispute on terms favorable to China, such as prohibiting countries from military or economic cooperation with countries outside the region. While China has not publicly stated its intentions behind the COC, some observers worry that Beijing hopes to position it as superseding UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in international law, furthering its case for de facto control over the South China Sea.

On a positive note, in the East China Sea, where both China and Japan claim the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, China had been reducing the frequency of its patrols and exercises from their highest levels in 2016 for air activity and 2012 for naval activity. This reduction may be due to the strategic focus on making gains in the South China Sea and the increased risk of confrontation with the United States in the East China Sea, as Washington has clarified that its defense obligations extend to the disputed islands. However, PLA exercises in 2018 were almost three times those in 2017, and by May 2019, PLA exercises for 2019 had already surpassed the total number conducted in 2018.[24] This suggests there may have been a change in policy to increased Chinese assertiveness in this area.

Beyond East Asia

The Chinese military activities have increased markedly during Xi Jinping's tenure. According to the 2019 Defense White Paper, between 2012 and 2018, the PLA participated in 11 international HADR operations and 100 international joint exercises with 17 different countries and organizations and was active in five overseas UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs). So far, in 2019 alone, China has conducted 13 joint exercises and HADR operations (compared to six in 2018).

China has greatly expanded its presence in Africa and the Indian Ocean, primarily through its first overseas military base in Djibouti, over a decade of Gulf of Aden anti-piracy missions, and its close relationship with Pakistan.[25] These developments have allowed the PLAN to keep a fleet of four to five surface vessels on average, plus submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean.[26] China has also used its "logistical support facility" in Djibouti to launch joint medical exercises and conduct live-fire military exercises in addition to the anti-piracy operations.[27] In 2019, China hosted the China-Africa peace and security forum, which invited both African military officers and key African Union leaders to discuss China-Africa cooperation and major

regional issues.[28] China also offers Africa financial support in the form of military assistance. In the past five years, 20 percent of Chinese arms exports went to Africa (the second-largest destination after Asia).[29] Pakistan and Algeria were China's largest and third-largest clients, respectively, for arms sales between 2014 and 2018.[30] Africa is a particularly robust market for Chinese drones and other surveillance equipment.[31] In February 2019, foreign minister Chen Xiaodong pledged an additional $80 million for the peacekeeping African Standby Force and African Capacity for Immediate Response Crisis, in addition to China's 2015 promise to donate $100 million in military assistance to the continent.[32] In terms of general investment, China has built or is planning to build 46 ports in Sub-Saharan Africa and has contributed nearly $3.71 billion in transport investment in Africa as a whole in 2019 alone.[33]

China has also been more active in its military diplomacy with the Pacific Islands, causing concern that China is seeking a permanent military presence there, in particular in Vanuatu.[34] While China has yet to conduct any clear military activity in this region, there are some reports that Chinese dual-use assets such as ships from China's "Distant Ocean Research Fleet" have been collecting biometric data from the South Pacific.[35] In the past, these types of ships have been used for surveillance or as part of China's maritime militia. The US has a unique agreement securing exclusive military access to these islands, but China is strengthening its economic and diplomatic ties with the Pacific Islands by including them in the Belt and Road Initiative.[36] Moreover, in July 2019, during the Fourth Forum for Senior Defense Officials from the Caribbean and South Pacific Countries, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe said that China is looking to deepen military cooperation.[37] It is unclear what this cooperation might look like, but China is likely looking to this region to secure natural resources, protect critical sea lanes from US control, and pressure the Pacific Islands to cut off diplomatic relations with Taiwan.[38]

China has been slowly increasing its military activities within European countries as well, particularly in the past few years. The 2019 Defense White Paper notes that the European Union is "accelerating its security and defense integration to be more independent in its own security," and China is capitalizing on this independence (from the US). Last year, in 2018, the PLAN conducted its first-ever combined exercise with the European Union Naval Force in waters near China's base in Djibouti.[39] Then, in July 2019, China deployed armored vehicles in Europe for the first time. The vehicles were delivered for an HADR exercise, Combined Aid 2019, in Germany (the second of its kind after a Chinese-German training in China).[40] That same month, the PLA's guided-missile destroyer *Xi'an* docked in Toulon, France.[41]

Lastly, the PLA has also been making inroads, albeit limited ones, in the US's own neighborhood. China is building military ties with South American countries through military exchanges, joint trainings, arms sales, and intelligence and information sharing agreements. Of these, the most worrying are Chinese access to ports and technology transfers. In the past five years, China has increased port calls to South America by 70 percent.[42] A particular area of concern is the increased Chinese presence in the Panama Canal. Two-thirds of US ships pass through this canal, and China has secured a $1.4 billion contract to build a new port and bridge.[43] Given China's penchant for dual-use port investments, the US's worst-case scenario in this regard is the "possible loss of commercial neutrality of the services and infrastructure" of the canal, which would severely threaten US shipping lanes and allow for blockades in a wartime scenario.[44] Another area of concern is China's technology transfers—particularly surveillance

equipment to Argentina and Venezuela. Many South American satellites and surveillance aircraft are launched, developed, or paid for by the Chinese, providing China with nearly real-time surveillance data about goings-on in the Western hemisphere.[45]

Lastly, there has been significant concern over China's growing interest in the Arctic, which remains mostly energy focused for now.[46] In January 2018, China released its first-ever white paper on its Arctic strategy, which laid out China's desire to be an "active participant, builder, and contributor in Arctic affairs."[47] This white paper not only inspired an internal restructuring in China with the establishment of the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration but also spurred regular Chinese Arctic expeditions (eight in 2018).[48] To support these efforts, China is building the world's first "ice-strengthened condensate tanker" to transport oil from the region and Arc7 vessels, which are polar-capable liquefied natural gas carriers.[49]

China-Russia Military Cooperation

Over the past year, there have been a number of indicators of closer cooperation and coordination between China and Russia, raising concerns that US policy is pushing the two countries into a strategic alliance. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have met seven times over the past year. In the past, the two have typically met five times per year, with a total of 24 meetings since 2013. By comparison, Xi has met with his US counterpart a total of 16 times since 2013, and Putin has met with US presidents a total of eight times since then.[50] Xi Jinping has asserted several times over the past year that Russia is Beijing's most important strategic partner and foreign policy priority.

The most notable trends, however, have been in the military and security space. Historically, China has been Russia's largest arms export destination, but China has been buying less arms from Russia since the early 2000s. The total market share of Russian arms exports to China dropped from 47.7 percent in 2006 to 8.7 percent in 2012 and has only risen slightly since.

In 2018, China accounted for 14 percent of Russia's total arms exports, second to India (27 percent). In 2017, Russia sold around $15 billion worth of weapons to China.[51] In 2019, Russia completed a $2.5 billion delivery of Su-35 multi-role fighters and agreed to jointly develop a heavy lift helicopter.[52] The Su-35 is a multirole fighter that will carry air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles, unguided rockets, and guided and unguided bombs.[53] Russia also sent the first of four to six S-400 *Triumf* long-range inceptor-based air defense systems to China. The system will complement China's existing air defense platforms like the HQ-16 and HQ-17 and give new surface-to-air and anti-stealth capability. The main implication of this system is that it can essentially guarantee a no-fly zone over Taiwan and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which are contested between Japan and China.[54] China has sent 100 PLA personnel to Russia for S-400 Air Defense System training as part of an ongoing training operation.[55]

But this year the scope and depth of the military exercises have caused some observers to wonder if an alliance-like relationship is on the horizon. In September 2018, the PLA participated in Russia's largest-ever military exercise, the Vostok-2018 exercise, by sending 3,200 military personnel. This was the first time the exercise was not a counterterrorism scenario, but instead an interstate conflict scenario to test "joint defensive and counter-attack operations capabilities"

that, according to Chinese media sources, are relevant for a North Korea scenario. The two countries have also conducted joint naval exercises[56] such as Joint Sea 2019 in Qingdao and annual anti-terrorism exercises within the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.[57] As recently as July 2019, China and Russia conducted their first joint patrol near the contested Dokdo/Takeshima islands to test US allies' air defenses. South Korea and Japan accused Russia of violating their airspace after Russian A-50 airborne early warning and control aircraft entered airspace claimed by both Seoul and Tokyo. But Russia denied the allegations, saying it was merely conducting its first-ever patrol with China over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan.[58]

One the one hand, I think that exercises, arms sales, and diplomatic platitudes are not sufficient to suggest that China and Russia are moving away from a relationship of convenience to something more closely resembling an alliance. For example, the establishment of joint naval command systems was not completely recent or new in principle. Joint command systems between China and Russia started to appear in 2010 during the "Peace Mission-2010" joint military exercise, when fighter jets from both sides merged into one squadron and performed joint tasks with the goal of practicing joint command codes and interoperability. On Volstok-18, the fact that most Chinese reporting on the exercise was in English suggested that the purpose was political signaling to the United States, not the improvement of interoperability.

The uptick in activity must also be understood in the broader context of increasing Chinese presence more generally. China is expanding its military relationships around the world. For example, the most recent defense white paper stated that China has signed 26 major nuclear and arms control treaties and five major counterterrorism treaties and is part of 10 major regional security dialogues and cooperation platforms. In practice, China has conducted 17 major joint exercises with foreign counterparts (10 of which are annual exercises), participates in five ongoing UNPKOs, and has conducted 11 HADR exercises with foreign countries since 2013.[59]

And there are obstacles to closer ties. Russia has extensive defense ties with countries that are not on the best of terms with China, such as India and Vietnam. Another potential area of Russia-China friction is Central Asia. Right in Russia's backyard, the region is geographically important for Chinese Belt and Road aspirations to secure energy land lines. In 2019 alone, China made $9.09 billion in energy and transport investment in West Asia.[60] For example, this past August alone, China participated in the International Army Games in Kaliningrad, which welcomes Central Asian militaries, and participated in joint exercises with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.[61] China is also increasing its arms sales in the region; for example, in 2018, China was Turkmenistan's second-largest arms supplier. (Russia was its third.)[62]

But the larger issue is that China continues to see close ties to Russia as a liability; Beijing is interested in becoming a "legitimate" great power and does not want to be associated with Russian revisionist and disruptive tactics that receive international opprobrium. In the words of the *Economist:* "An angry declining power like Russia is dangerous; it may feel tempted to lash out to show it is still a force to be reckoned with, by bullying Belarus, say, or by stoking the old fears of Chinese expansion into Siberia. But China has no appetite for international crises, unless they are of its own devising."[63] The economic imperative for a closer relationship is also absent. China is Russia's largest import origin and export destination, making up 20 percent of total

Russian imports and 11 percent of Russia's total exports.[64] However, Russia only makes up 1.8 percent of China's total exports (tied in 11th place with the Netherlands) and 2.5 percent of China's total imports (12th place).[65]

On the other hand, there are legitimate areas of concern. First, China has begun to work more closely with Moscow to protect its equities on the Korean Peninsula as the United States adopts more aggressive unilateral policies. Through adept diplomacy, China has made Moscow "increasingly receptive to Beijing's agenda."[66] Granted, Russia's role is far from decisive. Russia–North Korea trade in 2018 totaled just $34 million, significantly less than the $2.43 billion between China and North Korea in 2018.[67] But Moscow can support Chinese initiatives on the Security Council as it did for the 2017 UN resolution on the Freeze-for-Freeze proposal, or play bad cop when certain initiatives, such as softening sanctions against North Korea, are desirable but too politically costly for Beijing to lead.

Second, China and Russia could coordinate more closely to undermine US goals in the international system. The countries share a growing threat perception with respect to the US, and they are interested in working together to offset Western pressures and to create an alternative regional power center to push back against US hegemony. Chinese strategists use the term "strategic echoing" to describe the nature of bilateral indirect coordination. There is a tacit understanding that if one country takes an action, the other will do something to support or follow up on it. Most recently, both countries vetoed UN action for aid access and fair elections for Venezuela.[68] At the G20 Summit, Putin and Xi discussed free trade and the markets, criticizing the United States' protectionism.[69]

Lastly, Russia seems to have accepted its junior partner position, suggesting that it may be willing to help advance China's goals in the Indo-Pacific to weaken the United States even if China does not reciprocate by supporting Russian goals in Europe. If this is the case, it opens up the possibility of greater Russian involvement in Indo-Pacific security issues in support of Beijing. Full-fledged Russian military involvement in contingencies, such as on the Korean Peninsula or across the Taiwan Strait, would not be necessary to create severe operational dilemmas for the United States. In short, although fears of an alliance may be overblown, even minimal military cooperation is enough to hurt the US's ability to deter conflict and defeat China if a war breaks out.

If China and Russia began to cooperate on missile defense or nuclear deterrence, worked together to achieve common goals in third-party countries, or allowed each other to operate from their territories (e.g., giving China naval access through Vladivostok), this would indicate a level of strategic cooperation that would be highly problematic for the United States.[70]

China's Defense White Paper: A Sign of Confidence?

On July 24, 2019, the State Council Information Office released a new white paper titled "China's National Defense in the New Era."[71] The white paper is divided into six main sections: "the international security situation," "China's defensive national defense policy in the new era," "fulfilling the missions and tasks of China's armed forces in the new era," "reform in China's national defense and armed forces," "reasonable and appropriate defense expenditure," and

"actively contributing to building a community with a shared future for mankind." *Xinhua* reported that this is the 10th white paper on national defense since 1998 and the first one since the 18th National Congress in 2012.[72]

The Chinese defense white paper is not the equivalent of the US National Security Strategy; its primary purpose is to shape foreign perceptions of Chinese military modernization. But its content still provides information about how the PLA wants the world to perceive it. Specifically, three main themes become apparent.

First, China is becoming more comfortable with a greater global role and with a PLA that is more involved in promoting and implementing, if not shaping, Chinese foreign policy. This change reflects Xi Jinping's overall priority of improving China's stature on the international stage with his programs of national rejuvenation, Belt and Road Initiative, and a new type of major power relations. China is no longer hiding and biding, and it believes its military has a legitimate role to play on the global stage, especially given the extension of Chinese interests across the world. The white paper contains a newly expansive interpretation of national defense, asserting that "one of the missions of China's armed forces is to effectively protect the security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations, and institutions."[73] This statement suggests that China is shifting from an internal focus to reacting and adapting to a "new global era" in politics, spurred by US strategic competition. The white paper also covers Chinese military modernization for the first time, suggesting a greater comfort with showcasing its capabilities and progress toward becoming a "world-class force."[74]

Second, China wants to present itself as a force of peace and the US as an instigator of strategic competition. The white paper characterizes the People's Republic of China military developments as peaceful, defensive, and rational, with the PLA contributing to the global good through UNPKOs, HADR, joint exercises, major security dialogues, and multilateral treaties. Unlike the previous defense white paper, China argues that it can and should play a leadership role, such as through building the Asian "community of common destiny."[75] A full section compares Chinese defense spending with that of other countries, with the goal of arguing that its spending is appropriate and less than that of other actors (if metrics are selectively evaluated). In contrast, it criticizes the United States for undermining global security with "growing hegemonism, power politics, unilateralism, and constant regional conflicts and wars,"[76] as well as arms racing. In addition to the US, China accuses NATO countries, the EU, the UK, France, Germany, Japan, India, and Russia of causing a rise in global military competition.

Third, while the white paper attempts to assuage international concerns about China's military modernization, it also tries to provide justification for more assertive Chinese protection of what China sees as its interests, such as territorial integrity. On Taiwan, for example, the wording is much stronger than in previous editions. The white paper says: "To solve the Taiwan question and achieve complete reunification of the country is in the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation and essential to realizing national rejuvenation. . . . China . . . will never allow the secession of any part of its territory by anyone, any organization or any political party by any means at any time."[77] In terms of maritime disputes, the previous white paper made no mention of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and little mention of the South China Sea (SCS) (besides pointing out that "some external countries are busy meddling in SCS affairs"). In the 2019 white paper, the Communist Party of China emphasizes that the SCS islands and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are

"inalienable parts" of Chinese territory and that China will "deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs" in the SCS and "conduct patrols in the waters of the Diaoyu islands."[78]

US-China Military Balance: Peer or Near-Peer Competitor?

What follows are a few points about how I think we should understand the debate about whether the Chinese military is a near-peer or peer competitor with the US military.

First, the United States military is still vastly superior to the Chinese military. In a global context, the Chinese military is not even a near-peer competitor with respect to the United States, as it still has limited ability to project power and sustain operations far from its shores. But this fact is largely irrelevant for a number of reasons. First, China dedicates all its resources to planning and preparing for a contingency in East Asia, while the United States has additional responsibilities in the Middle East, Europe, and worldwide. If the context is confined to East Asia, then the Chinese military is closer to on par with the United States. Second, in any contingency, we would not be fighting the same war: China would have the advantage of fighting from home, while the United States would be projecting power across a vast distance. With this distance would come the vulnerabilities of relying on enablers such as satellites, tankers, and bases in other countries—all of which China could exploit without opening itself up to the same issues.

Thus, China need not have a military as sophisticated and big as that of the United States to be able to prevail in a conflict against the US. But it used to be the case that the US would always prevail; the only uncertainty was about what the cost would be and how long victory would take. Today, China could prevail in some situations. The issue is that we do not know how risk-averse China is—what Xi is willing to risk for the sake of, for example, reunification with Taiwan. As China's confidence in its relative capabilities versus the US's ability to thwart them increases, it will be harder to deter China from taking action.

Second, deterrence is defined by not only balance of power but also balance of resolve. China is willing to lose more for its goals than the United States is willing to sacrifice to deny these objectives to China. That means that for deterrence to hold, the United States has to convince China that it is resilient or, in other words, that our military is so superior that although we are not willing to sacrifice much, we won't have to. In other words, the balance of capabilities has to be disproportionately in the US's favor to outweigh the imbalance of resolve if deterrence is going to hold. I think China is close to being a peer competitor in the region, meaning that soon it will be difficult for the United States to deter Chinese aggression and coercion.

Third, there is a difference between an estimate of where we are today and the trends. The issue is not that China *has* surpassed the United States in military power; it has not. The issue is that given current trends, China will meet or outmatch US regional capabilities in the next five to 10 years. China will soon have a modern military capable of conducting joint operations, such as those necessary to deny access to the South China Sea, retake islands, or forcibly reunify with Taiwan. If, in the meantime, the United States military does not improve and strengthen its force posture in Asia, improve its resiliency, and increase its ability to forcibly deny China these

objectives, then Chinese leaders may decide it is worth the risk to use force. This is how we end up in a war with China—not because we are overly provocative or push back too much, but because we do not do enough to maintain deterrence in the region and China gains the confidence to jettison a cautious approach.

Policy Recommendations

It will be important to change the dynamics of the competition in the South China Sea. China's military position in the South China Sea has improved greatly without relying heavily on the military arm of its power. China understands that how other regional players react and respond is critical to strategic success, and the use of lawfare to confer legitimacy on one's policies complicates US responses. The United States needs to counter this approach by competing in the same diplomatic, legal, and political space.

First, we should spearhead and prioritize a diplomatic solution to the South China Sea disputes, with or without China. Countries in the region disagree with China's interpretation of international law—that Beijing has the right to draw baselines around its islands and claim internal waters; that some features, including artificial ones, get territorial seas and exclusive economic zones (EEZs); China's overly expansive EEZ claims; and that China has the right to regulate noneconomic activity, including military activity, within its EEZs. If the rest of the claimants agreed about not only the sovereignty of the islands themselves but also the rights granted by those islands and asked the international community to help enforce the agreement, China would have difficulty pushing its claims and pressuring states unilaterally to concede to its demands. A diplomatic solution that empowers Southeast Asian countries would serve multiple purposes: It would help maintain the US freedom to maneuver, present the US as a leader in the region beyond just the security partner of choice, and help countries be resilient to China's malign influence. Moreover, for many countries, the United States' military approach to addressing the South China Sea, in particular Freedom of Navigation Operations, are overly confrontational. In addition to a major diplomatic effort to resolve the disputes, the United States should pursue more legal initiatives against China.

Second, the United States needs to improve its force posture in Southeast Asia. Right now, U.S. forces are concentrated in Northeast Asia, which is less helpful if we need to deter and defeat Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. Access to new bases and ports in Southeast Asia is crucial—this means prioritizing relationships with Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam, to name a few. Upgrading such relationships can be politically challenging, especially given the latent threat of China lurking in the background. We need to ask these countries what would be necessary to get their support and a closer military relationship—and be open-minded about what such relationships may require.

To balance against the Soviet Union during the Cold War we had the strategic mindset and political will to look beyond China's political system to normalize relations and move that relationship forward. We need that degree of strategic thinking and political will; adhering to the same policies but expecting different outcomes will not change current trends in East Asia. We need to think differently: consider putting countries' rights to their EEZs within the context of our commitment to defend our allies, organize an international task force like the one in the Gulf

of Aden to ensure freedom of navigation for all nations in these waters, and consider provoking a strong Chinese response by militarily denying Beijing the ability to resupply and increase the militarization of islands in the South China Sea.

Militarily, we need to change how we think about and evaluate risk. For example, we need to focus on proportionate effects, not actions. So if China uses fishing boats to prevent other countries' access to economic resources, our response needs to be to allow that access, by whatever means necessary. We need to decide what exactly we are trying to deter. Is it just Chinese use of force or coercion more generally?

And we need to prioritize defense over deterrence. There is an implicit assumption that actions taken to enhance defense strengthen deterrence, and vice versa. But in practice, these can often be opposing goals. For example, some commentators call for the US to establish a more robust forward presence. However, given China's A2/AD capabilities, this puts even more US assets within range of Chinese cruise and ballistic missiles. On the other hand, if the United States moves toward a more agile basing concept in which US forces plan and prepare to operate from bases far from mainland China, for example in Australia or the southern Philippines, or some Pacific Islands, the US would be in a better position to defend its interests and its allies. But moving forces farther away may give regional partners and allies, and China, the idea that the US lacks the resolve to fight. In other words, some actions designed to strengthen the US deterrent weakens our ability to fight if deterrence fails.

All of this requires really making Asia, and in particular the South China Sea, the strategic imperative. On paper it may look like it is, but in practice it is not. President Trump has never publicly raised the issue of the South China Sea directly with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. He has never even tweeted about the issue during his time as president. President Obama did not push back against Chinese land reclamation or the militarization of the islands, allegedly because he did not want to fight a war over a bunch of rocks. The bevy of democratic candidates for president have been criticized for avoiding the issue of security competition with China: In the first democratic debate, China did not come up once in the context of national security.

Understandably, most national leaders want to avoid a war with a near-peer competitor such as China. But the only way to prevent a war is to deter Chinese aggression. If China doubts the US's will to fight and our ability to prevail if we did, then China will be much more likely to rely on coercion and aggression to accomplish its goals. This is what will drag our two countries into a war, thus maintaining deterrence needs to be the top priority. The United States needs to put the economic, diplomatic, and military resources behind maintaining the regional order in East Asia—and be willing to take some risks to ensure its success.

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