



# War Is Not an Option: China's Growing Military Strength Threatens America's Influence, Not Survival

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The People's Republic of China is evolving into a great power. Its military spending ranks second behind America. The People's Liberation Army is acquiring formidable capabilities. President Xi Jinping, Chairman of the Central Military Commission and de facto PLA commander-in-chief, has demonstrated that he is willing to use China's military.

This has spurred demands in Washington for greater military outlays, increased force deployments in Asia, and preparation for a great Indo-Pacific war. Citing the so-called Thucydides Trap, derived from the Athenian historian's celebrated history of the Peloponnesian War, some U.S. policymakers appear to believe conflict is inevitable.

It is not. Beijing is ambitious, to be sure. However, its designs are far less grand than those of America, which is determined to continue dominating the globe. Even if Chinese leaders imagine their nation eventually taking over as the world's greatest power, such an attempt is likely to be well into the future. Their country's weaknesses – demographic, economic, and political – are manifest. Today the PRC must spend more on internal security than on what is typically called defense. The price of ensuring domestic obedience is likely to continue rising as XI Jinping continues reaching back to Mao Zedong's more totalitarian model.

Moreover, the PRC's defense needs are many, since it is surrounded by nations with which it has been at war over the last century: Russia, India, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Beijing has clients rather than allies, which will follow the best deals. Its most important partnerships – with North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, and Russia – are based on mutual antipathy toward the US. However, these relationships cause America trouble, not fear. The threat to America is small.

In dealing with the US most Chinese policymakers recognize the need for caution, despite the recent rise of "wolf warrior diplomacy." Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies recently wrote that "it is important to note that in some ways, the Chinese [defense] White Paper is more moderate in its treatment of the US than US strategy papers have been in discussing military developments in China." Although the PRC acknowledges that the two countries are strategic competitors, "the text is very careful, however, to limit the level of this competition, and its wording makes it clear that China understands the risks involved."

Washington's policy should reflect this important reality. Beijing has neither the ability nor the reason to threaten America. Rather, China is challenging the former's dominance far abroad,

rather than existence at home. Given Washington's overwhelming nuclear advantage, a Chinese attack on the US would be foolhardy beyond reason. The PRC doesn't even have a practical way to reach America with conventional forces.

Washington has some possessions in the Asia-Pacific, most notably Guam and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands. However, they are minor and Beijing has never shown any interest in them, other than their likely role in US military operations. In practice America remains secure from Chinese attack, with the US homeland no more likely to be threatened by the PRC than by, say, Fiji.

If war erupts, it will be off China's coast in East Asia. If either country will be a battleground, it will be the PRC, not America. Any conflict will be to defend US domination of those waters as well as countries allied with or befriended by America, not the US. The fundamental issue will be American influence, not survival, the Chinese threat will be against interests far short of existential.

Washington still had good reason to avoid such a conflict. America's military remains superior, with better equipment and more experienced personnel. However, recognizing the serious threat of US intervention, Beijing is determined to create more capable armed forces. Noted the Defense Intelligence Agency in its 2019 report on the Chinese military: "In late 2015, President XI Jinping unveiled the most substantial PLA reforms in at least 30 years. The reforms were designed in part to make the PLA a leaner, more lethal force capable of conducting the types of joint operations that it believes it must master to compete with the US military."

The PRC faces substantial challenges in moving forward, but its capabilities should not be underestimated. Added the DIA: "Today's PLA is still far from being able to deploy large numbers of conventional forces globally, but China has developed nuclear, space, cyberspace, and other capabilities that can reach potential adversaries across the globe." Lyle Goldstein of the Naval War College made a similar point: "it is important not to overestimate US military advantages in any armed conflict with China. China has actually pulled ahead in some discreet but important domains of modern warfare. Moreover, the enormous weight of geography tends to negate many, if not most, US advantages when actual scenarios are analyzed."

Beijing's task in any conflict with America is far simpler than Washington's objectives: defend against US attack. Beijing would not be sending a carrier task force to bomb Pearl Harbor or an expeditionary force to seize Los Angeles. Rather, if Beijing engaged in offensive operations, it would be against nearby states over border/territorial disputes, as has happened with India and Vietnam, or could happen in the future with Japan and the Philippines. The most serious operation would be to coerce/conquer Taiwan. Given the difficulty of amphibious operations, most observers believe the PRC would first attempt to use limited means to force a negotiated surrender.

If Washington got involved, American forces would be on the move far from home, intending to sink PLA naval vessels, interdict Chinese commercial trade, and protect threatened islands, whether Taiwan, Japan, or the Philippines. Beijing would be on the strategic defensive against an aggressive US. As the Pentagon explained in its report last year on the PRC military: "China's leaders increasingly view the United States as adopting a more confrontational approach, reflecting China's long-held perception that the United States seeks to contain China's rise."

Furthermore, China sees recent US actions on trade and the public releases of US defense and national security strategies as indicative of this containment strategy."

In such a case, defense would be easier and cheaper than offense. The PRC would win by enforcing anti-access/area denial, that is, by preventing American forces from operating in the region. Explained the Pentagon: "China's military modernization plan includes the development of A2/AD capabilities to conduct long-range attacks against adversary forces who might deploy or operate within the western Pacific Ocean. PLA capabilities are currently most robust within the first island chain, though China aims to strengthen its capabilities to extend farther into the Pacific Ocean. These capabilities span the air, maritime, space, electromagnetic, and information domains."

This is a major objective of Chinese naval modernization. Noted the Congressional Research Service, the navy is to "deter US intervention in a conflict in China's near-seas region over Taiwan or some other issue, or failing that, delay the arrival or reduce the effectiveness of intervening US forces."

The US military is working to counteract such capabilities – in late July Defense Secretary Mark Esper said that he was repositioning forces in preparation for a confrontation with China – but to be successful such efforts cannot be conducted on the cheap. Observed Michele Flournoy and Gabrielle Chefetz, both of WestExec Associates (Flournoy also is a former undersecretary of defense for policy): "If the Pentagon's own reported war games and analysis are to be believed, the current force may well be insufficient to deter or defeat Chinese aggression in the future." Which means more ships, planes, personnel, and perhaps other capabilities are needed in the Pacific.

The simplest option would be to add additional units. However, that would require more money, in short supply even before the COVID-19 bailout. What was expected to be a \$1 trillion deficit this year is likely to exceed \$5 trillion, after another round of emergency spending is eventually approved. Next year the red ink will run more than \$2 trillion. And even before this year's budget tsunami, warned the Congressional Budget Office, the deficit was heading up to \$1.7 trillion over the coming decade without any economic or financial crisis. Spending pressure will continue to rise in succeeding years as more Baby Boomers retire, accelerating the jump in Social Security and Medicare outlays. Expenditures on Medicaid and interest also will rise, putting further pressure on the Pentagon. This impending fiscal tsunami highlights the shocking irresponsibility of having wasted trillions of dollars, thousands of lives, and unceasing effort on endless wars in the Middle East over the last two decades.

Alternatively, the Pentagon could shift resources from other regions and purposes, adapting personnel and equipment to new missions. Argued *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius: "It would be foolish to enter a new, post-pandemic world with the same old hardware." However, if the defense pie shrinks finding money for any East Asian buildup would remain problematic. US officials have consistently refused to set priorities, determined to continue defending populous and prosperous Europe from Russia and engaging in frivolous nation-building in the Middle East as well as containing China. Reprogramming existing resources would require fresh thinking in the Pentagon and Congress, which seems even less likely than finding fresh money.

Whatever the US does, it will cost China less to respond. For instance, Beijing does not need to launch 11 carrier groups. It only needs the means to sink 11 US carriers. Doing so still wouldn't

be easy, but the mere possibility would necessarily affect American operations. Observed Ignatius: "China's military isn't focused on projecting power, as ours is, but instead on preventing US domination. Rather than match our fleets of carriers and squadrons of jets around the world, Beijing developed precision weapons to prevent the United States from mobilizing these forces."

The PRC also has developed the ability to destroy nearby American bases, usually considered to be Washington's principle East Asian military asset. For instance, the Center for a New American Strategy considered Chinese missile capabilities. Its conclusion: "The results of our modeling and simulation, which show the potential for devastation of US power projection forces and bases in Asia, are deeply concerning – and a call for action." Rand Corporation war games had similar results. Reported Breaking Defense: "in RAND's wargames, which are often sponsored by the Pentagon, the US forces – colored blue on wargame maps – suffer heavy losses in one scenario after another and still can't stop Russia or China – red – from achieving their objectives, like overrunning US allies."

The prospect of war, especially a potentially losing war, with the PRC requires the American people to think carefully over what is worth fighting over. As a globe-spanning power, the US has interests everywhere. However, few are important, let alone vital. And military force should be the last resort to protect even those that are most important.

In the case of East Asia, Washington would have to spend substantially more to maintain its ability to project force, a cost likely to be excessive given the interests actually at stake. And the PRC always will have far greater commitment to East Asia.

The region obviously is vital to Beijing. Two centuries ago Washington declared the Monroe Doctrine for Latin America, ordering other powers to stay out. In Asia the US has done the reverse, insisting that not only does it get to come in, but it has the right to effectively exclude everyone else, *including neighboring nations*. Unsurprisingly, this has not gone over well with the PRC. The Chinese Foreign Ministry recently insisted: "The fundamental cause of instability in the South China Sea is the large-scale military activities and flexing of muscles by some nonregional country that lies tens of thousands of miles away."

America's alliances are not a compelling reason for intervention. They should be a means to an end, protecting America. Yet the 2018 National Defense Strategy treated allies as an end, setting "Defending allies from military aggression and bolstering partners against coercion" alongside "Defending the homeland from attack" as objectives. Security policy should be centered on American security, not foreign charity. Washington should not casually create triggers for war by promising to protect countries not essential to US security. Even when America is committed to the independence of allied states, such as Japan, the US should not promise to defend contested territorial claims involving such nations, like the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Washington should limit its military responsibilities to essentials.

That doesn't mean the US should be indifferent to the fate of its friends. In fact, they enjoy the same defensive advantage against the PRC as the US does against China. Tokyo is well able to prevent a Chinese invasion, a highly unlikely contingency, yet Japan spends less than one percent of GDP on the military. The Philippines gets involved in naval scuffles with Beijing over barren rocks in nearby waters with a navy whose flagship is a half-century old US Coast Guard castoff. Because of their own deficiencies both want to borrow the US Navy in an emergency.

What allied states spend on the military is up to them, but they should not clamor for Washington's assistance when they are unwilling to make a serious effort to defend themselves.

Limiting the threat of war to interests whose importance is evident even to potential adversaries would further reduce the chances of war. Noted Goldstein: "Perversely, American credibility is always under threat because Washington is so reluctant to make hard choices and to establish limits to US security guarantees. If alliances were interpreted in a clearly defensive manner (e.g., defense of home islands), issues of credibility would not arise, US credibility would actually be strengthened, and defense requirements would be clarified."

Diplomacy could help establish and define interests. Noted Goldstein: "what is required is hard-headed bargaining that leads to compromise on some of the thorniest issues. Such compromises will serve US national security interests by strictly limiting the costs and risks for the United States in an era of tremendous and somewhat dangerous flux in Asian politics." He offered numerous suggestions involving treatment of allies, positions on contested claims, transparency of military operations, weapons development, and more. There is no single, essential outcome. The goal should be what he called "mutual accommodation," restraining behavior, reducing tensions, encouraging settlements, and pulling all countries, especially Washington and Beijing, away from potential conflict.

The Beijing government is no friend of America or liberty. Domestically it is retrogressing to its totalitarian past. Internationally it is growing more assertive and potentially aggressive. Dealing with China is likely to become even more challenging in the future.

Yet fearmongering will only endanger US security. America remains far stronger economically and militarily. Despite the Trump administration's maladroit incompetence, Washington has far more international friends. And Beijing, despite its growing military strength, threatens not America, but interests more distant and less important, including allied states which remain able to constrain and deter the PRC.

Obviously, the security environment could change in the future. However, if so the US has time to react, rather than undermine its economy today with a needless military buildup over less than vital stakes. China's future is uncertain, and may turn out far less threatening than many presume. In any case, Washington should use the intervening years to seek a modus vivendi with Beijing allowing both nations to live together in peace. America must not risk turning the PRC into an enemy by treating it like one.

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