



# MARSHALL PAPERS

## Dilemmas of Deterrence

*The United States' Smart New Strategy Has Six Daunting Trade-offs*

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### THE ISSUE

#### Editors' Note

*Edited by Jude Blanchette of CSIS and Hal Brands of SAIS, the Marshall Papers is a series of essays that probes and challenges the assessments underpinning the U.S. approach to great power rivalry. The Papers will be rigorous yet provocative, continually pushing the boundaries of intellectual and policy debates. In this Marshall Paper, Hal Brands and Zack Cooper explore recent evolutions in U.S. deterrence strategy in the Western Pacific, assessing the rationale behind these changes and some of the major challenges and trade-offs Washington and its partners must confront in the coming years.*

As the danger of war rises in the Western Pacific, the United States is racing to reset its military strategy. China's astonishing military modernization—especially its arsenal of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities—has fundamentally challenged the old U.S. approach, which focused on defeating aggression by projecting decisive power into the first island chain. In response, the Pentagon is attempting a great inversion: to defeat Chinese power projection against Taiwan or another target, it is emulating Beijing's A2/AD strategy in hopes of making the Western Pacific a no-go zone for hostile forces.

This change, which some defense analysts have advocated for years, is a necessary response to China's daunting capabilities. It is a smart effort to make the geography of the region, and the inherent difficulty of power projection, work for, rather than against, the United States and its allies. Speed is essential in making this shift: Even as

the **stated** U.S. view is that conflict is “neither imminent nor inevitable” in the Taiwan Strait, numerous U.S. officials have warned that conflict could plausibly occur in the region this decade. This urgency is catalyzing constructive action across multiple U.S. alliances and every U.S. military service as they seek to make the strategy real in the limited time that may be left.

Every strategy brings dilemmas, though, and this strategy—call it “anti-access with American characteristics”—presents six crucial trade-offs the Pentagon and U.S. civilian leaders must address. Many of these challenges, moreover, must be confronted in coordination with U.S. allies and partners, but these conversations are not as advanced as they should be given the shrinking timeline and urgency of action. Strategy is the art of making hard choices, and the United States is only starting to reckon with the hard choices its new strategy involves.

## WASHINGTON'S STRATEGIC SHIFT

U.S. strategy has been turned upside down by two key developments: China's ballooning defense budget and its military-technological breakthroughs. Using defense resources made available by decades of rapid economic growth, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has developed a vast arsenal of capabilities—especially long-range missiles—designed to prevent U.S. forces from accessing bases along the Pacific's first island chain, as well as in the waters and airspace within them. According to the Pentagon's most recent **public report** on Chinese military power, for instance, Beijing now possesses roughly 1,000 medium-range ballistic missiles with a range of between 1,000 and 3,000 kilometers and 500 intermediate-range ballistic missiles with a range of between 3,000 and 5,500 kilometers. If a war were to break out, the PLA could now target nearly all U.S. forces within hundreds of miles of the Chinese coast.

The result is a weakening of America's ability to project power in a crucial region. A quarter century ago, China could barely detect, let alone destroy, U.S. aircraft carriers operating near its coast. Into the early 2010s, the Pentagon could—according to think tank reports—pursue a **strategy** that envisioned defeating Chinese aggression with a devastating precision-strike campaign against radars, missile bases, command-and-control centers, and other targets on Chinese soil.

Today, however, Beijing can threaten aircraft carriers hundreds of miles away, as well as the surface ships that escort them and the bases they visit. A growing inventory of advanced fighters, as well as the world's densest air defense network, can take a heavy toll on U.S. strike aircraft. Meanwhile, China's rapid nuclear buildup makes the prospect of carrying the war onto its territory much riskier by giving Beijing more credible nuclear response options. In short, the days of easily projecting power to China's shores are over.

The United States needs new capabilities and concepts—as well as enhanced coalitions—to offset this historic change in the military balance. To be sure, the United States will continue to require ways of breaking down China's battle networks and degrading its A2/AD capabilities. But simply doubling down on the traditional power projection strategy will not work under the current defense budget and in view of how formidable China's A2/AD capabilities have become. Instead, U.S. forces are trying to flip the script: they are trying to deny China the ability to project its power out-

ward. Rather than rely so heavily on a few large, vulnerable bases and scarce, expensive platforms like aircraft carriers, this strategy would empower smaller units that operate from more austere locations and fight with cheaper, more numerous, and more expendable weapons. The goal is to create a more resilient, diversified military posture up and down the Western Pacific with sufficient firepower to inflict an awful cost if the enemy attacks. The United States will not be able to reassert the level of military dominance it once enjoyed in the region, but it can prevent an age of Chinese dominance.

What makes this approach attractive is the fact that holding U.S. forces at bay is only half the challenge China faces. To conquer Taiwan or otherwise upend the regional status quo, Beijing must replicate the traditional U.S. mission of power projection by moving troops, ships, and planes into hostile areas and sustaining them there indefinitely. In fact, Beijing is in the process of fielding four aircraft carriers with more to come; it is building other long-range ships and aircraft that can operate throughout the region and beyond. The more China invests in these larger, more expensive platforms and the more it tries to exert control in the Western Pacific, the more it makes itself the target of the very strategy its own military has employed.

The United States has recently advanced several aspects of such a strategy. The first is real estate. Washington has secured or expanded U.S. access to bases in countries from Japan and the Philippines to Australia and Papua New Guinea, a crucial step in making U.S. forces more survivable if China attacks. There is significantly more work to do, but 2023 has been the most transformative year in a generation for America's Indo-Pacific posture.

The second aspect is capabilities. The Pentagon has announced programs such as the Replicator initiative, which seeks to build large numbers of small, cheap drones that can deliver devastating firepower. If these programs reach fruition, they could complement existing platforms, such as attack submarines and penetrating bombers, that can destroy Chinese forces within Beijing's A2/AD zone.

A third aspect involves concepts. The services are developing new (and somewhat embryonic) ways of employing these technologies. Examples include Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, a Marine Corps initiative that involves using antiship missiles and other ground-based fires to target Chinese vessels from small islands in the Western Pacific, and Agile Combat Employment, an Air Force

project that aims to preserve U.S. striking power by getting planes off of large, exposed bases when a crisis begins.

And fourth is coalitions. To generate the necessary firepower, secure access to critical terrain, and confront China with the prospect of a big war against multiple adversaries, the United States has strengthened bilateral alliances with Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines while also investing in new partnerships—such as AUKUS—linking countries in the region and beyond.

To be clear, anti-access with U.S. characteristics is more of a complement to than a pure replacement for the Pentagon's old approach. Aircraft carriers and major surface combatants would be needed to defeat a Chinese blockade of Taiwan, for instance, even if they suffered heavy losses. Tactical fighters, long-range bombers, and other manned aircraft will play an important role in delivering munitions and partnering with unmanned systems. The United States will still need to find ways of suppressing China's air defenses and hindering its kill chains. But legacy approaches alone cannot defeat a Chinese attack at acceptable cost. The United States needs asymmetric ways of thinning out enemy forces and preventing them from achieving their objectives.

To succeed, the United States will need a two-part force. A blunting layer of dispersed forces must survive the initial onslaught and prevent Chinese forces from winning a quick, decisive victory. Then a follow-on force of U.S. ships and aircraft will need to push into the theater to decisively defeat the remaining Chinese units. Ultimately, this might not be sufficient to terminate a conflict, but it would neutralize the immediate threat and buy time for other options meant to persuade Beijing to call it quits, such as a long-term economic pressure campaign.

America's new strategy, however, also raises new questions: Can a blunting force remain effective if it is exposed to devastating Chinese missile salvos and cannot easily be resupplied? Could these smaller units deter a conflict as well as larger and more visible ships and aircraft could? Should U.S. power projection forces remain in the first island chain or pull back to more defensible positions farther away? How hard should the United States push for access to new bases? Are allies prepared to play their part in this new strategy? And to what extent would anti-access with U.S. characteristics just redirect China's effort toward gray zone coercion?

These are difficult questions. They involve hard trade-offs between survivability and lethality, concealing and revealing, close-in and standoff operations, speed and

sustainability, sovereignty and efficiency, and gray zone and high-intensity conflict. As the United States tries to prepare for or, preferably, deter a potentially devastating conflict, these six issues require urgent attention and debate.

## **SURVIVABILITY OR LETHALITY**

A fundamental feature of today's environment is the development of accuracy independent of range, which makes it possible to precisely strike targets at great distances. This is why China's ballistic missile force, the largest in the world, poses such a threat to the aircraft and surface ships that the United States would need to project power into the Western Pacific. Hardening airfields and investing in air and missile defenses can help, but the cost-exchange ratio favors the attacker, since most missiles are significantly cheaper than the interceptors that engage them. If U.S. forces remain on large bases at Guam or Okinawa, they risk being destroyed. Military units must disperse and hide to survive. The dilemma is that once they do, they will struggle to generate the striking power—the lethality—needed to defeat a Chinese assault.

This problem involves logistics and sustainment: the more dispersed one's forces, the harder it is to keep them well supplied. The Air Force, for instance, has shown it can get attack aircraft out of vulnerable places in a hurry. Less certain is whether it can deliver the fuel, weapons, and other support those planes will need to conduct combat missions from wherever they go to ride out the storm. If U.S. planes cannot fly strike missions in the opening days or weeks of a Taiwan crisis, Taipei might fold and close Washington's window to respond. Similar challenges afflict the Army's Multi-Domain Operations concept.

To be fair, the picture varies across the services. By making significant changes to its force structure, the Marine Corps has become better positioned to distribute small units across numerous islands while also equipping them with real firepower. Yet services that rely on large platforms (the Navy), large bases (the Air Force), or large formations (the Army) have more work to do to make their forces survivable without undermining their ability to land a lethal punch.

## **CONCEAL OR REVEAL**

As new operational concepts take shape around smaller, more dispersed units, the Pentagon will face another challenge: how to deter China with less visible forces.



The accuracy of today's weapons means visible forces are increasingly vulnerable, but the best capabilities for deterring opponents and reassuring friends are those they can plainly see. Alternatively, concealing capabilities can help maximize their effect on the battlefield but undercuts their deterrent value before a conflict begins.

Take, for example, one of America's most effective deterrents—the purported ability to disrupt Chinese power projection by using cyberattacks to disable PLA command, control, and communications. Disclosing the details of this capability would require revealing U.S. access to Chinese networks, which would give Beijing a chance to close breaches. The same basic problem would apply to revealing new operating locations or highly secretive systems, such as advanced undersea drones, stealthy aircraft, space-based capabilities, and others.

A related issue involves timing. Unveiling new capabilities during a crisis might bolster deterrence but could come too late, after Chinese leaders have made the crucial decision to act. Publicly revealing new capabilities in the opening phases of a crisis could increase tensions, complicate efforts to deescalate, and lead third parties to blame Washington for the conflict. Admittedly, these are not new problems. But they are made more difficult by the fact that the United States no longer has such overwhelming conventional superiority, so it must hold more in reserve to surprise Chinese military commanders and complicate their operations after the shooting starts.

## **CLOSE-IN OR STANDOFF**

A third trade-off involves geography: Where should the United States place these more dispersed forces? For decades, U.S. power projection was so effective that even massed forward-deployed forces were largely invulnerable to enemy attack, and U.S. dominance was so pronounced that even faraway forces could reach the theater in time to make the vital difference. Today, however, China could do catastrophic damage to the Pentagon's forward-most forces, whether they be ships near the Taiwan Strait or units on the ground in Okinawa. Moreover, if China can quickly establish dominance in and around the Taiwan Strait, assets stationed farther away might not arrive soon enough to prevent a *fait accompli*.

Thus, the dilemma: if the United States stations most of its combat power along the first island chain, the PLA could conduct a crippling first strike. Yet if Washington keeps the bulk of its forces over the horizon at bases in

the second island chain or even farther away, then China might be emboldened to try the *fait accompli*. Of course, if Beijing chooses to kill a large number of Americans in a first strike, it is probably choosing a long, bloody war with an enraged superpower as well. But even in that case, U.S. allies would face the possibility of being pounded as U.S. forces fight from distant locations—not exactly a recipe for alliance cohesion in a crucial moment.

An answer—albeit an uncomfortable one—is to divide U.S. forces into two elements. Some units would serve as frontline forces to blunt Chinese attacks and reassure allied publics. These forces would constitute a bulwark and a trip wire: they would deny China the option of using force without bloodying U.S. personnel. They would commit the United States to the fight while also giving Washington some combat power early on. The objective of these forces would not be to establish U.S. dominance within the first island chain but rather to prevent China from dominating portions of the first island chain itself. Mobile forces equipped with antiship and anti-aircraft missiles would blunt Chinese attacks on U.S. allies and partners.

Ultimately, this blunting force would also buy time and serve as a shield behind which standoff forces, such as long-range stealth aircraft or other platforms capable of delivering munitions from a distance, could operate at somewhat decreased risk. Unfortunately, the costs to these close-in units could be very high, so the United States might not want to place its most advanced capabilities at risk—fifth-generation tactical aircraft, or aircraft carrier strike groups, for instance—until it has succeeded in degrading China's A2/AD capabilities, primarily through strikes delivering from longer range. In the meantime, forward-stationed forces might suffer ghastly losses.

## **SPEED OR SUSTAINABILITY**

A fourth trade-off is political. Washington's new strategy is predicated on rapidly diversifying U.S. operating locations from a handful of major U.S. bases to a range of ally and partner bases, austere sites, and even some civilian facilities. The United States has made remarkable progress in this endeavor; key allies like Japan are expanding their military footprints as well. Yet the harder Washington pushes to make use of these locations today, the more it risks damaging critical relationships.

This tension is on display in Japan's southwest islands. Okinawa, Miyako, Ishigaki, and Yonaguni are critical real

estate given their proximity to Taiwan. If the United States could, for instance, station hordes of long-range antiship missiles on the outermost islands, the military balance in the Taiwan Strait would change overnight. But populations on some of these islands are ambivalent about a growing Japanese military presence, let alone any sizable deployment of Americans. If Washington pushes too hard, it risks alienating local populations and causing diplomatic setbacks. If Washington does not push hard enough, the United States and its allies might not be ready if a conflict comes.

The same point could be made regarding the Philippines. Under President Joe Biden, the United States has made remarkable progress in jump-starting implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement and gaining access to additional facilities in that country. In theory, these facilities—some of which are on the northern island of Luzon—could play a vital role in a Taiwan contingency. In reality, what access the United States would have to those facilities in a crisis remains uncertain. The more tensions increase, the greater the need for the United States to have clarity about this issue and to position more (and more capable) forces there. Those needs may clash, however, with the political incentives of the government in Manila, which would presumably prefer to defer hard choices that could put local communities in the firing line if conflict ensues.

## SOVEREIGNTY OR EFFICIENCY

Allies and partners are central to U.S. strategy because the China challenge is more serious than anything the United States has faced in decades. Beijing can field a force so large and potent that the United States cannot succeed on its own. Even under the most favorable assumptions about the development of U.S. and Taiwanese capabilities, the United States will still need—at a bare minimum—access to bases in Japan and perhaps other countries. Yet, after several decades in which allied contributions were a “nice to have” but not a “need to have,” there is little muscle memory in Asia about how to conduct complex coalition operations in a high-intensity environment.

Getting the coalition dynamics right requires addressing tough questions about roles, missions, capabilities, and—most of all—politics. Which allies would be willing to commit their forces in advance of a conflict? Under what circumstances would they do so? And with what caveats about their use? The answers to these questions will vary greatly from country to country, even from leader to leader. And

although it seems likely that close allies, such as Japan or Australia, will indeed side with the United States if shooting starts, their leaders are often unwilling, for understandable political and diplomatic reasons, to make that commitment explicit in advance.

Ideally, a U.S.-led coalition would maximize efficiency: Washington would rely on allies to build niche capabilities and focus on particular missions, freeing up U.S. forces for the most daunting tasks. A similar argument has been made for why Taiwan should ditch its expensive planes and warships, which will probably be destroyed or disabled at the outset of any conflict, and instead focus on antiship missiles, mines, and other asymmetric capabilities that can help it survive until help arrives. But Taiwan is hesitant to do this because it has no ironclad assurance help will come—not even from the United States.

This illustrates the larger dilemma: if no one really knows who will or will not fight in a crisis, a clean division of labor becomes dangerous because absent allies would create glaring gaps. Political leaders in the Western Pacific naturally want to preserve flexibility and protect sovereignty. Yet this undermines efficiency by forcing Washington to plan for the possibility that its allies will not show up. The dilemma works the other way as well: the less reliable the United States seems due to resurgent isolationism or political dysfunction, the less willing its allies will be to make potentially costly commitments to fight by its side.

## GRAY ZONE OR HIGH INTENSITY

A final tension is between dealing with day-to-day gray zone challenges—maritime coercion, menacing aerial intercepts, and other pressure tactics short of war—and preparing for the potential outbreak of a major conflict. Gray zone engagements require frequent sorties, which wear down aircraft and their crews. There is a real trade-off between showing the flag in the South China Sea and training for high-intensity conflict. The Pentagon’s preference may be to concentrate intently on deterring high-intensity conflict—the fight that the United States simply cannot afford to lose—but even if it does so successfully, its friends will still suffer as Beijing salami-slices the status quo.

For example, the U.S. military is heavily focused on a potential war in the Taiwan Strait, most notably the challenge of rapidly sinking an invasion fleet. But although this is the most dangerous contingency, it is not the only, or per-

haps even the most likely, one. Every day China is squeezing Taiwan, using a high operations tempo and boundary encroachment to nibble away at its buffer zones. Likewise, the challenge in the South China Sea is not a matter of Beijing mounting an all-out invasion of the Philippines. It involves using fishing boats, maritime militia, coast guard vessels, and other capabilities to undermine sovereignty.

Unfortunately, many of the capabilities needed for gray zone scenarios are different from those needed for high-end deterrence missions. Small units equipped with antiship missiles may be lethally effective against an invasion fleet, but they are of less use in helping the Philippines defend its sovereignty against everyday encroachment or helping Japan cope with pressure from Chinese aircraft over the East China Sea. In fairness, this dilemma might well attend any U.S. defense strategy in the Western Pacific. But the more Washington emphasizes high-end conflict scenarios and anti-access forces, the sharper this trade-off will become.

## NO EASY ANSWERS

There are no perfect solutions to these challenges. Every choice comes with risks and consequences. The best the United States and its allies and partners can do is mitigate those risks to the extent possible, which begins with recognizing that the requirements of assurance, deterrence, and warfighting often cut in different directions—and that Washington cannot adequately address any of these dilemmas on its own.

As discussed, the Pentagon may envision addressing the competing imperatives of assurance, deterrence, and warfighting by effectively bifurcating the force. An “inside force” located within the first island chain would reassure allies of U.S. commitment and dissuade China from thinking it can succeed with a rapid *fait accompli*. If war occurs, it will be supplemented by an “outside force,” located mostly beyond the immediate reach of China’s most potent A2/AD assets, which would provide the bulk of the striking power needed to turn back a PLA assault and eventually end the conflict on favorable terms. Yet that is only a partial answer to the dilemmas raised here, many of which will persist even if the United States optimizes different parts of its forces for different tasks.

One requirement for more squarely confronting trade-offs between speed and sustainability, between survivability and lethality, and so on would be closer coordination between the officials responsible—in the United States

and friendly countries—for operational planning, capability development, and alliance management. After all, the hardest trade-offs tend to arise at the intersection of these tasks. But even within the U.S. government, it is not clear that the dilemmas are as sharply understood, or as explicitly acknowledged, as they could be. When the authors recently traveled to the region, we were struck that many of these dilemmas are not really being debated yet with key allies and partners.

This is a potentially costly mistake. Each trade-off has extensive implications for Indo-Pacific allies and partners; addressing them requires not just understanding but also extensive military reforms and sensitive political guidance from U.S. friends. The U.S. military no longer possesses power projection capabilities so overwhelming it can determine its strategy independently and then seek the acquiescence of like-minded nations. For the first time in decades, Washington must truly integrate its Asian friends into its most crucial strategic debates—as well as the training, exercises, contingency planning processes, and wargames that both inform and flow from those debates. The alternative is a strategy that becomes dangerously disjointed as the United States and other defenders of the Asian order confront difficult choices in divergent ways.

Given the growing worry about crises or conflict, there is little time to waste. The shorter the time horizon gets, the starker the trade-offs will become. Hard dilemmas are the price to pay for decades of lethargy in dealing with a growing Chinese challenge. If the United States, its allies, and its partners do not confront these issues head-on today, the consequences could be ugly tomorrow. ■

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