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# ANALYSIS

**Sino-U.S. Competition and U.S. Security:  
How Do We Assess the Military Balance?**

*Dan Blumenthal*

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## Sino-U.S. Competition and U.S. Security: How Do We Assess the Military Balance?

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## Executive Summary

This essay argues that scholars and analysts can help policymakers advance U.S. interests in Asia by assessing the dynamic Sino-U.S. balance of power in the region.

### *Main Argument*

Assessments of the military competition between China and the U.S. are badly needed but mostly missing. Such assessments should consider the political objectives of the competitors, their military doctrines, and alliance politics, in addition to quantitative measures of military power in the context in which such capabilities would be deployed. Clashing political and military objectives will define the rivalry between the U.S. and China. For the U.S., the most important characteristics of the rivalry are those that impinge on Washington's ability to defend its interests in the world's most important region. These interests include protecting the U.S. homeland, preventing the emergence of a hostile hegemon in Asia, encouraging continued liberal economic and political reforms, and preserving the global commons. These goals must be assessed against China's growing ability to coerce U.S. allies, interdict U.S. forces, and cut off U.S. access to parts of the global commons in possible pursuit of regional hegemony. Considered in these terms, the United States may not have the overwhelming advantage that many assume.

### *Policy Implications*

- Thinking seriously about rivalry with China is more likely to preclude rather than encourage conflict. Unfounded fears can be put to rest while fears with foundation can be remediated. If the United States successfully balances Chinese power, the two sides may be dissuaded from conflict and forge more areas of cooperation.
- Washington has long supported a security umbrella over allies and partners in Asia, but China's political and military ambitions may challenge this status quo. Clashing Sino-U.S. regional political objectives will be the key driver of the changing military competition.
- The advantages of the U.S. and its allies on paper relative to China can be misleading when accounting for the differences in strategy, doctrine, and political goals of the two sides.

**H**ow should we assess the military balance in Asia? As Asia takes center stage in international politics, this would seem a question of prime importance for statesmen, military officers, policy analysts, and scholars. Scholars and practitioners of international politics insist that a political leader's knowledge of his country's relative power is a prerequisite for successful statesmanship.<sup>1</sup> U.S. presidents seem to agree: in one form or another, all have called or pressed for a balance of power in Asia favorable to the United States. But how can presidents know that the military balance in Asia is in its favor, and why does this matter? This essay will make four points. The first section addresses why analyzing the Sino-U.S. balance of military power is important. Second, the essay suggests that analysts can learn from some of the methodologies developed to assess the military competition during the Cold War. Third, it explains what the United States is competing over in Asia, and how the nature of that competition will shape the changing Sino-U.S. military balance. I do not believe that analysts can say much of use about a Sino-U.S. military competition without understanding the underlying dynamics of the political competition. Fourth, the essay addresses key themes and questions that could helpfully structure an assessment of Sino-U.S. balance.

### Why Study a Sino-U.S. Military Balance?

Since the end of the Cold War, a broad consensus has emerged among policymakers and analysts that Asia is becoming the center of power in world affairs. As Asia's prominence grows, so do U.S. interests in the region. Scholars and policymakers all agree that both the manner in which China becomes a great power and the way it exercises power is central to Asia's future. At the same time, many have recognized that China's growing military capabilities could disrupt the region's ongoing peaceful transformation. Thus, U.S. policy has been based on two broad impulses. Washington seeks cooperative relations to integrate China into the international system, and it has sought to hedge against or balance China's growing military might. Sino-U.S. relations are thus characterized by elements of cooperation and competition, which U.S. policy must balance. While this may be counterintuitive, if the United States maintains a favorable balance of power, it is more likely to have cooperative relations with Beijing.

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<sup>1</sup> See Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), chap. 1. For example, Friedberg quotes Henry Kissinger's assertion that "the test of a statesman... is his ability to recognize the real relationship of forces and to make this knowledge serve his ends" (p. 10). Friedberg similarly cites Hans Morgenthau and Walter Lippman, among many others who wrote about the importance of assessing one's country's relative power position.

The United States can only compete, however, if it knows over what it is competing. This in turn requires an understanding of the dynamic Sino-U.S. military balance. A clearer picture of how U.S. military forces measure up against China's should be the basis for a sound policy. Knowledge of the military balance can help policymakers with both the cooperative and the competitive elements of the relationship with China.<sup>2</sup> On the competitive side, presidents and their advisors can better assess how to adjust the U.S. force posture to balance China's growing power and reassure allies that China will not dominate Asia. In doing so, they can help the world's most rapidly growing region avoid costly, perhaps even uncontrollable (and nuclear), arms races and conflicts. On the cooperative side, a sense of where the country stands in a competition with China could help U.S. leaders decide when to accommodate Beijing in ways that would not harm national security. Once we know what really matters, in all likelihood, we will be less worried about some Chinese capabilities.

Policymakers and analysts can learn from the ways in which the United States successfully engaged in past security competitions. The Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, for example, preoccupied successive presidents, who were attentive to military balances in a range of possible contingencies and scenarios. Mercifully, competition never led to an outright Soviet-U.S. conflict—perhaps because the United States did its part to deter aggression and reassure its allies.

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<sup>2</sup> The more extreme permutations of the “self-fulfilling prophesy” theory of Sino-U.S. relations, which claims that if the United States treats China as an enemy, it will become one, are off base. For an explanation of the theory, see Joseph Nye, “Advancing U.S. Strategy for East Asian Security,” *Wall Street Journal Asia*, May 5, 2005, available at [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/1415/advancing\\_us\\_strategy\\_for\\_east\\_asian\\_security.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/1415/advancing_us_strategy_for_east_asian_security.html). While it is probably true that treating China as an enemy increases the likelihood that it will become one, simply thinking about China as a rival or even a potential enemy is far likelier to lead to U.S. policies that foreclose that possibility. In practice, the self-fulfilling prophesy theory has been taken to extremes—the Pentagon is inhibited from even mentioning China as a potential enemy. Andrew Krepenivich observes in the *Wall Street Journal* that government self-censorship about China has “gotten so bad that in the Pentagon some now refer to China as ‘Voldemort,’” the evil wizard from the Harry Potter series who is often referred to as “he who must not be named.” See Andrew F. Krepinevich, “China’s ‘Finlandization’ Strategy in the Pacific,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704164904575421753851404076.html>.

While political leaders made the decisions that led to success in the Cold War, analysts certainly helped by engaging in a spirited debate about the balance of power.<sup>3</sup> Many of these assessments were the basis for U.S. Cold War policy, from cooperative issues such as how to control certain arms races to competitive issues such as military posture. Although competition with China shares little in common with the Cold War—primarily because this competition is unfolding under conditions of deep economic interdependence—balance of power assessments are no less important than they were in the competition with the Soviet Union.

Indeed, an ongoing analysis of where the United States stands in relative power may make it less likely for Washington to treat China as an enemy. Successfully competing with China militarily may in fact lead to more cooperative behavior between the two countries. The United States can make efforts to dominate the region or coerce other countries more costly and unattractive for China. In turn, China can put its energies into more cooperative policies that accept the status quo. And, it is possible to imagine that if Washington takes the right steps to remediate a balance of power trending toward China, the United States and its allies will feel less threatened, act out of a sense of confidence rather than anxiety, have more leverage, and find themselves more willing to concede in certain areas of diplomacy. It is thus incumbent on U.S. leaders to know where the nation stands in relation to China's growing power.

An analytical debate over the security competition with China—a topic ripe for scholarly debate—can edify the public and contribute to sound policy. The Pentagon has now published several reports on Chinese military power,<sup>4</sup> but curiously there is a

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<sup>3</sup> For a taste of the analysis and analytic debates during the Cold War, see, for example, A.W. Marshall, "Problems of Estimating Military Power," RAND, August 1966; John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Soviets Can't Win Quickly in Central Europe," *International Security* 7, no. 1 (Summer 1982): 3–39; and Barry R. Posen, "Measuring the European Conventional Balance: Coping with Complexity in Threat Assessment," *International Security* 9, no. 3 (Winter 1984/85): 47–88. See also Eliot A. Cohen, "Toward Better Net Assessment: Rethinking the European Conventional Balance," *International Security* 13, no. 1 (Summer 1988): 50–89; Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Assessment of Military Power: A Review Essay," *International Security* 12, no. 3 (Winter 1987/88): 190–202; and Richard K. Betts, "Conventional Deterrence: Predictive Uncertainty and Policy Confidence," *World Politics* 37, no. 2 (January 1985): 153–79.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2010* (Washington, D.C., 2010).

relative dearth of debate about the Asian military balance.<sup>5</sup> This is a mistake. Scholars and analysts can help policymakers think through this critical problem.

## How to Study the Balance: Classical Strategy and Net Assessment

Not all Cold War balance assessments were useful. Analysts responded to the complexity and longevity of the Cold War competition by developing a diverse repertoire of analytic techniques to help policymakers understand “how much was enough” in defense spending, how the Soviet Union could be deterred and defeated, what forces would have meaningful impacts on Soviet decisionmaking in peacetime and war, and the implications of a new form of warfare—one involving nuclear weapons.

The problem for busy policymakers who needed to measure the effectiveness of their defense programs and make decisions about allocating scarce resources was that the traditional principles of strategy were (and still are) difficult to translate into quantifiable terms.<sup>6</sup> For example, the traditional “bean counts” of comparative force-posture analysis mostly matter in the context of how an adversary might use force in a particular engagement or interaction. Principles of classical strategic analysis mostly measure intangibles. But to the great frustration of decisionmakers, that type of analysis is by its nature an art, not a science.

However, many of the models that Cold War defense analysts developed to guide decisionmakers, such as systems analysis and quantitative modeling, by themselves did not tell policymakers enough about how investment in a given force structure

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<sup>5</sup> Some exceptions include Thomas J. Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up: China’s Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 5–40; and Robert S. Ross, “The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century,” *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999): 81–118. Two RAND studies highlight the implications of China’s anti-access and missile forces for broader U.S. security goals: David A. Shlapak et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute* (Washington, D.C.: RAND, 2009); and Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon’s Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Washington, D.C.: RAND, 2007). For earlier, more narrow looks at Taiwan and Korea, see Jae-Jung Suh, “Assessing The Military Balance in Korea,” *Asian Perspective* 28, no. 4 (2004): 63–88; Michael O’Hanlon, “Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 51–86; Nick Beldecos and Eric Heginbotham, “The Conventional Military Balance in Korea,” *Breakthroughs* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 1–8; and Stuart K. Masaki, “The Korean Question: Assessing the Military Balance,” *Security Studies* 4, no. 2 (1994): 365–425.

<sup>6</sup> By classical strategic analysis and its principles, the essay is referring to strategists such as those analyzed by Michael Handel in *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 1992).



might affect a real, animate adversary in an actual conflict or peacetime competition.<sup>7</sup> As Richard Betts writes, “much analysis of conventional deterrence is purely military in content based on capabilities. Whether given capabilities deter, tempt, or provoke attack is highly dependent on political factors—especially the nature of the potential attackers’ motives and beliefs.”<sup>8</sup> Analysis that did not include intangibles, such as the motives and beliefs of leaders, had the potential to ignore the most salient questions about the usefulness of allied or enemy capabilities.

In the latter stages of the Cold War, analysts inside and outside government began to revivify and refine the classical techniques of strategic analysis, emphasizing the types of questions that Carl von Clausewitz or Sun Tzu might ask about a military competition.<sup>9</sup> For example, as Stephen Rosen has pointed out, Clausewitz asked a fairly simple question that lends itself to very complex answers: “In considering a prospective war, how can a government know how much force is necessary to bring to bear against the potential enemy?”<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz himself states: “We must gauge the character of... the [enemy] government and people and do the same in regard to the political sympathies of other states and the effect war will have on them.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the underlying political objectives of the competitors, their military doctrines, and alliance politics provide critical context to quantitative measures of military power. Sound strategic decisions must be based on the study of the political, military, economic, and cultural characteristics of all possible belligerents and a deep knowledge of one’s own dominant political-military characteristics and objectives. A war or a peacetime competition is highly interactive, characterized by sets of moves

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<sup>7</sup> For a critique of systems analysis, see Eliot A. Cohen, “Guessing Game: A Reappraisal of Systems Analysis,” in *The Strategic Imperative: New Policies for American Security*, ed. Samuel P. Huntington (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1992), 163–91.

<sup>8</sup> Betts, “Conventional Deterrence,” 154.

<sup>9</sup> For an intellectual history of Cold War strategic analysis, see George R. Pickett, James G. Roche, and Barry D. Watts, “Net Assessment: A Historical Review,” in *On Not Confusing Ourselves: Essays on National Security Strategy in Honor of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter*, eds. Andrew W. Marshall, J.J. Martin, and Henry S. Rowen (Boulder: Westview, 1991), 159–85.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Peter Rosen, “Net Assessment as an Analytical Concept,” in Marshall et al., *On Not Confusing Ourselves*, 286.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. As Handel points out, Sun Tzu’s writings would be recognizable to contemporary net assessors. The title of chapter 1 of *The Art of War* translates to “Assessments,” while the title of chapter 6 translates to “Weak Points and Strong Points.” See Handel, *Masters of War*, 111; and Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Roger Ames (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993). The classical strategists and the net assessors share a focus on the need for relative assessment—of one military versus another living, breathing, animate military—as well as the application of strength against weakness in many different contexts.

and countermoves. Success in the exercise of power or deployment of forces is both relative and highly contingent on an almost unquantifiable set of intangibles.

While the Sino-U.S. competition is more different than similar to the Cold War competition, the “net assessment” approach (or traditional methods of strategy) used in some Cold War balance assessments can be usefully applied in a contemporary context.<sup>12</sup> The nature of a military competition will always be primarily political. Moreover, in the case of China, Beijing appears to take into account a host of political factors in making decisions about force investments; Chinese analysts write about weaknesses inherent in the U.S. political system, the problems of alliance and coalition operations, and the psychological effects of certain weapons or forces.

Like their Cold War predecessors, assessors of the Asian military balance can easily fall into analytical traps.<sup>13</sup> For example, a common error today is to count up the totality of U.S. and allied forces and measure them against China’s. A balance assessment so structured can be soothing but does not tell policymakers very much; rather, the underlying character of the political struggle can begin to illuminate the issues over which each side’s force may fight. A second error is to neglect China’s own beliefs about the character of various balances that matter to the country. For example, the belief that the United States has serious weaknesses (even if the People’s Liberation Army, or PLA, is wrong), combined with a doctrine emphasizing surprise attack and with China’s limited political aims in some conflicts, changes the measure of the balance in important ways. Third, it is important to assess in the proper context discernable trends in force investments. China’s doctrinal and capability innovations—for example, ballistic missiles—look very different in the context of a campaign in which the PLA uses most of its submarines, fourth-generation aircraft, and surface ships, all of which are equipped with antiship cruise missiles. Finally, while the United States has very capable allies, these allies only matter if, one, they chose to fight and, two, they can fight effectively alongside each other.

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<sup>12</sup> I deliberately conflate the study and practice of net assessment as developed by the creator and director of the Office of Net Assessment, Andrew W. Marshall, with what I call traditional approaches to strategic analysis. I see the same similarities that Stephen Rosen describes: “The military theoretician Carl Von Clausewitz...deserves credit for being the first to try and delineate the general character of net assessment at the level of national military interaction...[H]is emphasis on understanding war as a human activity directed against an animate reacting enemy clearly indicates his awareness of the need to...consider the likely dynamic interactions of the belligerents.” Rosen, “Net Assessment as an Analytical Concept,” 286. See also Handel, *Masters of War*; Huntington, *The Strategic Imperative*, particularly Cohen, “Guessing Game: A Reappraisal of Systems,” 163–91, and Huntington, “The Renewal of Strategy,” 1–52. For an understanding of the net assessment techniques developed by Marshall and his protégés, see Marshall et al., *On Not Confusing Ourselves*, as well as Cohen, “Toward Better Net Assessment.”

<sup>13</sup> For a description of some of the Cold War traps, see Cohen, “Toward Better Net Assessment.”

In applying the art of net assessment to the Sino-U.S. competition, analysts should ask the following questions:

- What are the two sides' political objectives, and where do they clash? How might those clashing political objectives manifest themselves in military competitions or conflicts?
- How does each side think it is doing relative to the other?
- What are each side's respective military strategies, doctrines, or ideas about how it would fight? What identifiable capabilities and doctrinal innovations matter, and why?
- What are the discernable trends in the force investments of each competitor?
- What is the nature of alliance politics—who may participate in a conflict and under what conditions?

This essay will address in some depth the most important question that analysts must address: What clashing political objectives characterize the Sino-U.S. security competition? The analysis is heavily weighted toward U.S. security objectives, with some commentary on China's strategy. The essay will then offer some initial thoughts on the remaining salutary questions.

### **U.S. Interests in Asia and the Nature of Sino-U.S. Competition**

While all post-Cold War presidents seem to agree that Asia is growing in its importance to U.S. security and well-being, some of the most basic questions regarding the U.S. regional military role remain largely unanswered. This is particularly puzzling given that the United States maintains a significant amount of force in Asia. U.S. forces remain in Japan and South Korea presumably to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan and North Korean aggression against South Korea and Japan. But would the United States really go to war over Taiwan? Are there other issues at stake?

Presidents have stated loosely defined Asia policies such as “urging responsible behavior from China” and “hedging against a more aggressive China.” Washington has furthermore called for a “peaceful resolution to the Taiwan crisis” and a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. These statements imply a China that Washington does not yet view as responsible and that can turn aggressive. But what is the job of U.S.

forces in advancing these goals and how can the United States know if it is achieving them? Moreover, some of these stated aims have already been frustrated—for example, North Korea has acquired nuclear weapons. Is this a policy failure or was a nuclear-free Korea never a serious goal? What do U.S. allies in Asia think about policy declarations that Washington does not seem to take seriously? How would Washington respond should China use force against Taiwan? How will U.S. forces be employed to hedge against possible Chinese belligerency? How does Washington know if it is successfully hedging? Is military force expected to be used in some manner if China does not behave responsibly? Moreover, besides integrating China into the world order, what are other security goals in Asia?

### *The Rise of U.S. Interests in Asia*

One can usefully begin to answer some of these questions by examining the United States' strategic behavior in the region during the period leading up to and after World War II. Two goals appear consistent and enduring: protecting the homeland and U.S. interests in Asia from a forward position in the region, and preventing the emergence of a hostile hegemonic power in Asia (first Japan, then Communism, and now possibly China). With Asia's rise in international prominence, another strategic objective has emerged: helping to foster Asia's continued development in accordance with the principles of democratic and economic liberalism.

Before World War II, Japan rose as a hegemonic power, began locking the United States out of the region, built the capabilities to attack the U.S. homeland, and then did so. It took a gruesome Pacific War for U.S. policymakers to devote enough resources toward protecting U.S. territory and interests from threats that could emerge from East Asia.

With Japan's utter destruction and rising tensions with both the Soviet Union and the newly formed People's Republic of China (PRC), U.S. leaders once more began to fear a hegemonic enemy in Asia that could pose a threat from the Pacific. Even before the Cold War, military planners, haunted by the attack on Pearl Harbor, wanted to turn the Pacific into an "American lake" by holding and militarizing territory in the Pacific Basin.<sup>14</sup> By the onset of the Cold War, the United States wanted a forward-based defense perimeter in East Asia. U.S. leaders insisted on defending the United States' Pacific possessions and U.S. territory far forward—they wanted neither a repeat of Pearl Harbor nor of the bloody slog through the Pacific that was required to defeat Japan. General Douglas MacArthur and Secretary of State Dean Acheson enunciated the

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<sup>14</sup> See Hal M. Friedman, *Creating an American Lake: United States Imperialism and Strategic Security in the Pacific Basin, 1945–1947* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001).

concept of a “defense perimeter” far away from Hawaii and closer to mainland Asia,<sup>15</sup> a task that required the U.S. Navy and Air Force to “control every wave” in the Pacific.<sup>16</sup>

When North Korea attacked the South with Stalin’s and Mao’s support, Washington quickly realized that Japan, the anchor of the defense perimeter, could be neither defended nor reconstructed if Korea fell into hostile hands. U.S. forces fought another war, this time on the peninsula. At the same time, the United States committed itself to Taiwan’s defense. The island simply sat too close to the defense perimeter to be handed to a hostile PRC. Washington responded to increasing security threats by expanding its concept of the defense perimeter. It signed defense treaties with Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Thailand, and the Philippines.

U.S. presidents were partly driven by the importance of the defense perimeter in escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Beginning with the State Department under Acheson, U.S. leaders—including Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy<sup>17</sup>—believed that the region now comprising Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos was critical to the U.S. defense posture in Asia. Thus, the basic U.S. security interest in preventing the hostile domination of the region and in defending its Pacific territories and homeland from a forward position required more than offshore positions along the Ryukyus. The United States was prepared to fight and make security commitments on the mainland of Asia itself in places such as Thailand, Vietnam, and South Korea to keep those countries out of hostile hands.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Douglas MacArthur, as quoted in Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969), 355–58. As Dean Acheson put it, “this defensive perimeter that runs along the Aleutians to Japan and then goes to the Ryukyus. We hold important defense positions in the Ryukyu Islands, and these we will continue to hold.... The defensive perimeter runs from the Ryukyus to the Philippine Islands.” Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 357. On the importance in particular of Okinawa to the U.S. military, see Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 465.

<sup>16</sup> Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations throughout History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 283.

<sup>17</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, “President Eisenhower’s News Conference, April 7, 1954,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1954* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Registrar, 1960), 382, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/ps11.htm>. For President Kennedy’s view, see “President Kennedy’s View of the “Domino Theory,” in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, vol. 2, ed. Mike Gavel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 818–19, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon2/ps31.htm>. For a discussion of the Acheson State Department’s view of the importance of Vietnam to the defense of Japan, see Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 469–70.

<sup>18</sup> The United States brought to bear massive amounts of military capability in the Korean and Vietnam Wars: 1.8 million Americans served in the Korean War, and 2.59 million in Vietnam, with nearly a half million serving at the latter war’s peak.

Even after withdrawing from Vietnam, the United States' adjustments to its forward defense were minimal. The logic of a forward presence in Asia was overwhelming. The presence of U.S. troops in Japan and South Korea became more or less permanent, and the United States retained all its pre-Vietnam War allied relationships.<sup>19</sup> As it protected the perimeter, Washington also furnished economic and financial assistance to its Asian allies and encouraged their entry into the international trading system. These policies began to pay off. By the late 1970s, most allies were booming economically and slowly edging toward more liberal governance. The defense perimeter had become a security umbrella, and the security umbrella provided a secondary benefit beyond protecting the homeland: Asian elites had been given the political space to modernize their countries.

The large U.S. security umbrella and the visible presence of U.S. forces in the region became part of Asia's "geopolitical fabric."<sup>20</sup> At the same time, U.S. leaders urged their Asian friends to embrace the international political and economic order, and kept the U.S. market open to Asian exports. Under the U.S. security umbrella, Asian leaders for the most part made wise choices that led to rapid economic growth and political modernization. This development, combined with China's abandonment of a Maoist domestic and foreign policy and entry into the international economic system, as well as the removal of the Soviet Union as a threat in Asia, set the conditions for the region to take its place as the center of international political and economic activity. No less important, all U.S. allies in the Pacific had forgone nuclear capabilities, thereby reducing the chances of intense security competition.

Particularly in China's case, however, with newfound wealth came the ability to generate military power, and with newfound power came greater ambitions based on a deep sense of historical grievance and a historical identity as the region's dominant actor. Thus, two world-historical events have conspired to raise the stakes for the United States in Asia. First, Asia's growing economic and political importance ties Washington's future well-being ever closer to the region. Second, China's growing power, ambition, and apparent desire for regional dominance put the character of Asia's future, and thus U.S. security and prosperity, into question.

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<sup>19</sup> President Carter considered removing troops from South Korea but was opposed by a bipartisan group of congressmen and statesmen.

<sup>20</sup> See Dennis C. Blair, "Military Power Projection in Asia," in *Strategic Asia 2008-09: Challenges and Choices*, eds. Ashley J. Tellis, Mercy Kuo, and Andrew Marble (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2008), 391-420.

*The Emergence of Asia and the United States' Continued Role in the Region*

Today the region appears stable and its modernization patterns are consistent with U.S. interests. Most countries welcome U.S. military presence and share a basic vision that Asia should be free from domination by a single power as the region continues its mostly liberal political and economic development. That is, while occasionally irritated at Washington's arrogance and missteps, most of the region is satisfied with the still preponderant power practiced by the United States, undergirded by (until recently) uncontested military capabilities.

As Asian nations play a larger role in world affairs, Washington, the prime beneficiary of the liberal international order, has a vested interest in strengthening that order by encouraging all Asian nations to continue to or begin to embrace it. Thus, the United States has an interest in fostering, as it did in Europe, an Asia "whole and free," characterized by democratic nations trading with one another and settling disputes peacefully.<sup>21</sup> While this may be the dominant trend in Asia today, no peace enforces itself, nor does a stable balance of power simply emerge. Rather, absent the emergence of a new benign power or coalition of powers able to underwrite Asia's security, Washington will need to continue playing the role of Asia's main security provider for the foreseeable future. From a military point of view, this means that the United States, increasingly together with its allies, must be able to project power from forward-deployed bases and assets and continue to "command the commons," as Barry Posen has stated, to enable the U.S. military to reinforce its forward-deployed forces.<sup>22</sup>

The military requirements of U.S. regional interests are manifold. First, the United States must contain or frustrate any military expansion into the Pacific that could threaten the U.S. homeland. Second, the United States must have the ability to defend its states and territories in and from the Pacific. Third, it must maintain unfettered military access to both maritime and mainland Asia in order to safeguard the global commons, defend and reassure allies, and deter coercion. Washington's historical goals for the region continue to endure and, in fact, grow ever more important in the contemporary political, social, economic, and security climate.

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<sup>21</sup> For a more on the necessity of an Asia "whole and free," see Dan Blumenthal and Aaron Friedberg, "An American Strategy for Asia," American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Asia Strategy Working Group, January 12, 2009, [http://www.aei.org/docLib/20090106\\_AsiaStrategyReport.pdf](http://www.aei.org/docLib/20090106_AsiaStrategyReport.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> See Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 5–46. A successful challenge to U.S. command of the commons could give China a say in matters well outside the region. In particular, China's cyber and space capabilities could make it difficult for the United States to deploy forces quickly in other parts of the region.

### *A China Challenge*

China's strategic objectives are quite different. While China seeks a peaceful environment to continue its unprecedented growth, it has other goals that, because of Beijing's opacity, must be inferred from its military modernization program and diplomatic activities. The foremost goal is to keep the region safe for the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP has made this objective synonymous with restoring China to some semblance of its past position atop a power hierarchy within Asia.<sup>23</sup> This grand political project requires the restoration of lost territories such as Taiwan as well as other less well-defined territories within China's land and maritime periphery.

Both the CCP's goal of reinstating China to its position of paramount importance in Asia as well as the country's ever-expanding economic and natural resource needs have required new missions for the PLA. Over the short term, establishing some measure of Chinese regional supremacy and enforcing territorial claims requires that the PLA possess military capabilities to coerce and intimidate U.S. allies and partners, exert more control around China's periphery, extend its operational reach into the Pacific Ocean in order to interdict U.S. forces, and extend its ability to control and possibly block U.S. access to critical sea lanes and chokepoints. China can only achieve some modicum of regional dominance if it is able to keep U.S. forces from operating effectively in Asia.

China has a demonstrated unhappiness with a Taiwan that remains de facto independent in perpetuity. It is also dissatisfied with customary maritime international law, particularly when the law impinges on its territorial claims in the South and East China seas. China wants the capability to settle land disputes favorably (including with other great powers such as India). And because of its desire to preclude any instability that might harm economic growth, the PRC wants more control over what happens inside, and along its border with, North Korea. This is leading China to unilaterally prepare for a range of contingencies in Pyongyang, primarily because Beijing views the Kim regime as a liability but does not trust the United States, Japan, or South Korea to fashion policies that would benefit the PRC.<sup>24</sup> China has expressed deep concern

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<sup>23</sup> For a comprehensive and recent analysis of the Chinese elite's historical memory and strategic culture, particularly regarding beliefs about China's natural place as paramount atop a hierarchy, see Christopher A. Ford, *The Mind of Empire: China's History and Modern Foreign Relations* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> See Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies and U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), USIP Working Paper, January 3, 2008.



over U.S.–Republic of Korea deterrent activity near its shoreline and presumably wants capabilities to stop such activity in the future, an objective consistent with Beijing’s desire for a voice in the peninsula’s final disposition.

In addition, China’s apparent interest in aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, along with access arrangements along the Indian Ocean, signals some long-term intent to exert more control over trade routes originating in Africa and the Persian Gulf. This perceived requirement is driven in part by a profound distrust of the United States. No matter how many times the United States tries to persuade it otherwise, Beijing believes that Washington has a hidden desire to weaken and contain China.

Given these apparent objectives, China’s military modernization program has focused on building capabilities to coerce Taiwan into unification, establish capabilities for (time-limited) air supremacy over what Beijing calls the first island chain,<sup>25</sup> and interdict and destroy U.S. surface ships steaming toward the region. China’s advanced destroyers and submarines can operate in and beyond the second island chain.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, improvements in China’s command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR), including space-based and over-the-horizon sensors, could enable Beijing to identify, track, and target military activities deep into the western Pacific Ocean. China is also looking to extend its coercive capabilities (particularly the ability to conduct air and missile campaigns and blockades) against other claimants to waters and resources in the South and East China seas and to clear the waters of lawful U.S. maritime activity. According to the Pentagon’s 2010 report on the PLA, China’s base at Hainan Island is large enough to accommodate a mix of attack and ballistic missile submarines and surface combatants. The base’s underground facilities provide China with access to critical sea lanes and allow for “stealthy deployment of submarines into the South China Sea.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, new missile units with conventional missiles deployed at many locations within China could, together with airborne early warning and control capabilities and aerial refueling programs, extend China’s operational reach into the South China Sea. China’s expeditionary forces (three airborne divisions, two amphibious infantry divisions, two marine brigades, and approximately seven special operations groups) can be used in certain contingencies in North Korea or on Taiwan.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The Aleutians, the Kuriles, the Japanese Archipelago, the Ryukyus, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo.

<sup>26</sup> The Sea of Japan, the Philippine Sea, the Indonesia Sea, the Kurile Islands, the Kokkaido Islands, and the Marianas and Palau Islands in the south.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

*Sino-U.S. Rivalry*

Washington's military posture has supported the U.S. regional strategy of extending a security umbrella over allies and partners. The United States has relied on forward bases, particularly in Japan, to project air and sea power, and has relied heavily on carrier strike groups to steam to the region at the first sign of trouble. Washington's command of the commons—air, sea, and space—has enabled the U.S. military to project and deploy large amounts of force to the region with relative impunity. The United States has used forward bases in East Asia and on Diego Garcia, as well as command of the Pacific as its own “lake,” to prosecute major wars in Vietnam and Korea, to send force into the Taiwan Strait several times in the twentieth century to quiet Chinese threats, to conduct major humanitarian relief operations that supported important U.S. policy goals in Southeast Asia, to prevent a coup in the Philippines, to deter war on the Korean Peninsula, to ensure the safety of maritime traffic from the Persian Gulf to Asia during the Iran-Iraq War, and to conduct a wide array of major exercises that have reassured all Washington's regional partners.<sup>29</sup> However, that strategy is now facing a serious challenge from Beijing. Near China (as well as in space and cyberspace), the United States will no longer enjoy the uncontested command of the seas and airspace that has allowed it to accomplish its manifold security tasks in Asia.

China thus presents a serious challenge to Washington's traditional security strategy. China could destabilize the region either by unsuccessfully vying for regional hegemony or by successfully becoming the region's dominant player. An Asia characterized by a China vying for hegemony could devolve into economic or military spheres of influence from which the United States could be excluded, or the region could descend into a highly intense and destabilizing security competition. If the PRC succeeds in fashioning the capabilities to coerce and intimidate Asian states and to realize its apparent desire to be Asia's dominant power, U.S. interests could be gravely endangered.

China's foreign policy goals and emerging military strategy conflict with some of Washington's primary security interests in the region. For example, a Taiwan coerced into unification could change the strategic geography of the region in ways harmful to the maintenance of a forward defense and raise doubts about the steadfastness of U.S. security commitments. If China were to establish some degree of local air supremacy and a measure of sea control, it could coerce and intimidate key U.S. allies such as Japan, on whom Washington relies for a forward defense of the Pacific. A China that

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<sup>29</sup> Blair, “Military Power Projection in Asia,” 391–420. As Dennis Blair observes, the United States conducts large-scale military exercises in the region, such as Cobra Gold in Thailand, Valiant Shield in Guam, Foal Eagle in Korea, and the Malabar exercise in the Indian Ocean. Blair claims that U.S. military forces are so ubiquitous that they are part of the region's geopolitical fabric.

can block chokepoints in the South China Sea poses a threat to the United States' interest in unimpeded access to the critical trade routes of Asia. A China with aircraft carriers (and the logistical support such ships need) can start to project power and gain a measure of sea control, thereby instigating harmful arms races as well as putting at risk U.S. maritime interests. In sum, if China were to realize its military aspirations, it could begin to achieve hegemony in one of the world's most critical regions, enabling Beijing, if it chooses, to reshape the international system more to its liking and—for the first time since before the attack on Pearl Harbor—pose a threat to the United States from the Pacific.

### **Assessing the Balance: Key Questions and Initial Answers**

How then, can one begin to assess the relative power of China against that of the United States? In this section I will use both the guidelines discussed in the first section as well as the above analysis of competing regional political objectives to offer initial thoughts on how to structure and think about the Asian balance of power. The section will consider five basic questions that should structure an Asian balance of power assessment. First, how might the two sides' opposing political objectives manifest themselves in a military competition? Second, what is China's perspective on elements of the balance? Third, how should we understand Chinese military-technological innovations in the context of evolving Chinese operational conceptions? Fourth, what is the relevance of the two countries' force investment trends for actual conflict? Fifth, how might alliance politics, perceptions, and capabilities affect decisions on how force is used in particular conflicts?

#### *Politics and the Balance of Power*

The competing political objectives explained in the previous section will be the dominant force shaping the Sino-U.S. security competition. On the one hand, this competition will be characterized by continually modernizing Chinese regional coercive capabilities and China's growing ability to raise the cost to the United States of defending its allies and projecting power into the region. On the other hand, Washington will continue to find ways to maintain its forward presence, to reassure allies, and to command the commons in order to reinforce U.S. presence in case of a crisis.

As the rising power challenging the status quo, China has seized the initiative. In turn, the United States is forced into defending its traditional power-projecting instruments and regional allies and bases. Though it has been slow to respond,

Washington may choose to do so with more vigor. In this scenario, the United States will need to find innovative ways to project and sustain power at very long distances against an adversary that can, for the first time in many years, put U.S. ships and fighter aircraft at risk.

For the United States, the military tasks associated with defending U.S. and Asian interests are daunting. These tasks include continuing to defend the homeland from a forward position in the Pacific; helping to strengthen and deter allies against intimidation; deterring and, if necessary, resisting Chinese coercion of or an attack on allies and friends; retaining free use of the commons; and assuring unfettered access to the Asian continent to defend growing U.S. interests there.

For China, the military tasks are somewhat less overwhelming because they are all closer to the homeland. In order to conduct coercive diplomacy and threaten U.S. forward-deployed bases and assets, China can continue to deploy missile forces; land, maritime, and increasingly space-based C4ISR; undersea forces; air forces; and “blinding” capabilities (anti-space, cyber, and electronic warfare). China faces a more complex set of challenges if it moves more firmly in the direction of developing aircraft carriers and working to achieve sea control.

In the near future, a peacetime military competition could turn into a conflict over clashing Taiwan and Korea policies, clashing interests in the South China Sea, or an overheating Sino-Japanese dispute. Over the longer term, competing views of what constitutes security in Asia could engender a more intense military rivalry or even conflict.

### *Chinese Perspectives on the Military Balance*

How does China assess its military power relative to potential adversaries? Over what, and against whom, will it fight? China seems to have started to partially answer those questions, having stated that it would fight Taiwan under certain circumstances as well as that it is prepared to fight the United States, and possibly Japan, over Taiwan. Of the three, Beijing obviously believes that the United States is the most formidable opponent, and therefore pays the most attention to identifying U.S. vulnerabilities. China perceives five major weaknesses in the U.S. military. First, the United States is over-dependent on information or C4ISR systems that China believes are vulnerable to attack. Second, Washington has long logistical lead times that delay the U.S. ability to bring force to bear quickly in a conflict. Third, the U.S. military is overcommitted and overused. Fourth, the U.S. political system is not conducive to the effective use of military force, particularly because of its casualty aversion. Fifth, the United States

is overly dependent on allies whose idiosyncratic politics make effective military operations more complicated.<sup>30</sup>

This perception that the United States has serious weaknesses (particularly in responding quickly to a crisis), combined with a doctrine and set of strategic principles that emphasize surprise, possible preemption (active defense, as China calls it), and deception, could convince Beijing that it can quickly launch and conclude certain surprise attacks with limited aims before the United States can even respond.

### *New Capabilities in the Context of Chinese Perceptions, Doctrine, and Strategy*

It will be helpful to examine China's military-technological innovations in the context of evolving Chinese operational concepts.<sup>31</sup> This requires avoiding analytical traps such as viewing new Chinese capabilities in a vacuum. For example, China scholar Robert Ross says:

Thus, the argument that China is on the verge of developing and deploying a transformative asymmetric force rests on unrealistic worst-case estimates that do not reflect the limits of current Chinese capabilities; the intrinsic difficulty of designing and producing high-technology, experimental weapons systems; and the vulnerability of an ASBM system to U.S. countermeasures. China's ASBM program is not a "silver bullet" that will magically transform the U.S. deterrent posture in the region or undermine American alliances.<sup>32</sup>

But China is not looking for "silver bullets." Rather, the country is seriously innovating in circumscribed areas where it believes it can develop advantages. The important question is how China would use a particular set of forces with a particular doctrine to achieve a particular set of political aims in a particular timeframe. With respect to Taiwan, for example, if China uses force, it may use great quantities in innovative ways. The PRC's growing missile force, which includes an antiship ballistic

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<sup>30</sup> This section borrows liberally from Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair*.

<sup>31</sup> There has been some useful work in People's Liberation Army (PLA) studies conducted under the auspices of the U.S. Army War College and the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR). See, for example, the PLA studies series begun by AEI, the Heritage Foundation, and the Army War College. For recent examples, see Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, ed., *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions Other than Taiwan* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009); Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner, ed., *The "People" in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China's Military* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008); and Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, ed., *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg and Robert S. Ross, "Here Be Dragons: Is China a Military Threat?" *National Interest* (September–October 2009).

missile (ASBM), begins to look very different when a picture forms of how the PLA may use such capabilities.

Chinese operational planning for Taiwan seems to include a punitive attack on the island and the denial and defeat of any forces coming to Taiwan's aid. This strategy would be guided by the principles of surprise, possible preemption, "key point" strikes against what Chinese theorists deem to be critical nodes in the U.S. battle network (e.g., logistics, C4ISR), and concentrated attacks that achieve decisive blows against "targets vital to sustaining and supporting the enemy's operational system."<sup>33</sup> The stress on a concentrated attack and the focus on possible preemption is driven by an explicit criticism of Iraq's strategy and tactics during the first Gulf War. According to Chinese analysts, in that conflict the United States was given too much time to build up its forces without being attacked and Iraqi Scud missiles were not fired in a concentrated and operationally effective manner.

If China does not achieve its desired strategic goals with a quick punitive strike against Taiwan—by, for example, bringing Taiwan to the table on Beijing's terms—it appears to have plans in place to escalate the conflict. The PRC could utilize missile forces to "kick in the door" on the island by taking out all Taiwan's airfields and runways and establishing air superiority over the strait. China's increasingly sophisticated air force could then attack Taiwan with relative impunity.<sup>34</sup> While China could try to attack only Taiwan, it may also seek to strike devastating blows against the United States and Japan in order to keep the two countries from intervening. Indeed, China is contemplating massive air and missile strikes on the Kadena and Iwakuni air bases in Japan, despite the geopolitical risks.<sup>35</sup> Beijing may be willing to take this risk if it calculates that a devastating blow against U.S. and allied bases would present Washington with a *fait accompli* because the United States has no good conventional responses and would not risk nuclear escalation.

If China were to decide it needs to engage U.S. forces to win in Taiwan, the PLA would execute a sea-denial strategy employing attack submarines, fighter aircraft equipped with cruise missiles, and land-based ballistic missiles with maneuverable warheads to threaten U.S. aircraft carriers and other U.S. ships at sea. The PLA is developing an intelligence,

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<sup>33</sup> Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye, ed., *Science of Campaigns* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2000), 96. On Chinese views of airpower doctrine and firepower warfare, see Mark A. Stokes and Ian Easton, *Evolving Aerospace Trends in the Asia-Pacific Region: Implications for Stability in the Taiwan Strait and Beyond*, Project 2049 Institute, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Shlapak et al., *A Question of Balance*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

surveillance, and reconnaissance capability to target U.S. Navy surface forces at sea. The PLA Navy (PLAN) could use its submarine force to attack U.S. Navy surface strike groups operating within tactical aircraft range of mainland China. China's conventionally powered attack submarines carry antiship cruise missiles as well as torpedoes.<sup>36</sup> The PLA appears to be developing innovative uses of missiles: it is placing seekers on ballistic missile warheads that will activate as the warhead descends into the target area and then steer the warhead to the moving ship.<sup>37</sup>

China's ASBM is important in this context, and not as a silver bullet. The U.S. Navy has never before faced the threat of accurate land-based ballistic missiles capable of hitting moving surface ships at sea. Due to their ability to change course, the maneuverable re-entry vehicles (MaRV) on an ASBM would be more difficult to intercept than nonmaneuvering ballistic missile re-entry vehicles, particularly when simultaneously faced with threats from Chinese submarines, surface ships, and aircraft equipped with antiship cruise missiles.<sup>38</sup> The land-based ASBM will be but one in a probable onslaught of missiles targeting U.S. forces.

The importance of missiles in China's strategic culture is also worth considering. The Chinese military-industrial establishment has been focused on, and perfecting, land-based missiles for decades. The missile force has enjoyed pride of place in China's military establishment, often gaining access to China's best and brightest minds and resources. Missiles are also favored within a Chinese strategic culture still suspicious of too much expeditionary force or decentralized command. Due to these considerations as well as for operational reasons, the U.S. military should expect China to allocate a large amount of resources in order to perfect land-based missiles that can target mobile ships at greater distances.

The salient points for a balance assessment are twofold. First, when dealing with a political issue for which China has raised the stakes to a very high level, such as Taiwan, the PRC may be willing to use a great deal of force and attain a high level of doctrinal and technical innovation to achieve its goals. By contrast, in the dispute over the South China Sea, which China claims as its territory, Beijing seems at this point more reluctant

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<sup>36</sup> For a description of a possible Chinese sea interdiction strategy, see Michael McDevitt, "China's Approach to Taiwan and the U.S. Navy's Imperatives for Action," in *Coping with the Dragon: Essays on PLA Transformation and the U.S. Military* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Technology and National Security at the National Defense University, 2007), 59.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> For a description of the ASBM, see Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL33153, October 1, 2010.

to start a war. South China Sea engagements thus may be characterized by lower levels of violence and less intense confrontations.

The second point is that China's revisions to its missile force and undersea doctrines and capabilities begin to seem much more innovative and threatening in the context of a coercive campaign against Taiwan. The political context of China's force modernization should make analysts cautious about assuming that the United States can defeat Chinese forces in all settings simply because they "pale in comparison" to overall U.S. forces.<sup>39</sup> That the United States has nuclear-powered carriers, F-22s, or Virginia-class submarines does not matter if Washington chooses not to use such assets within China's close-in kill zones, if they are destroyed on the ground or sunk, or if they are engaged elsewhere in the world. Considering the capabilities China has to defeat the United States' traditional forms of warfare, and each side's view of the respective stakes, the key questions are what would we actually bring to the fight and when and how would we do so?

### *Force Investment and Posture Trends*

What types of forces would the United States need for particular types of conflicts against China? Are we properly investing in those forces? What are the trends? For this family of questions, quantity matters, particularly because U.S. force structure in the region is continually eroding, whereas China's is becoming larger. An example is submarines, which promise to play a significant role in a Sino-U.S. military conflict. The

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Richard Bitzinger, "Military Modernization in the Asia-Pacific: Assessing New Capabilities," in *Strategic Asia 2010–11: Asia's Rising Power and America's Continued Purpose*, eds. Ashley J. Tellis, Andrew Marble, and Travis Tanner (Seattle: NBR, 2010), 107. Bitzinger, perhaps the leading U.S. analyst of Asian defense issues, is in good company. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has made the same mistake, asking "Is it a dire threat that by 2020 the United States will have only 20 times more advanced stealth fighters than China?" But this misses the point. By 2020 the United States will still probably be engaged in twenty times more global military missions than China, and short-range tactical aircraft may not be as useful as Secretary Gates suggests without properly defended bases and carriers. Robert M. Gates, "Eisenhower Library (Defense Spending)," U.S. Department of Defense, May 8, 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1467>. China scholar Drew Thompson falls into this analytical trap as well, stating that "Arguably, the more significant figure for comparison is defense spending. Here the PLA lags far behind the Pentagon. In 2009, the U.S. military spent \$738 billion on defense and homeland security. Estimates for China's annual military budget vary considerably, ranging from \$69.5 billion to \$150 billion, but it's clear that U.S. military spending is still several times higher than China's, the world's second highest." See Drew Thompson, "Think Again: Why China's Military Is Not Yet a Threat," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2000, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/22/think\\_again\\_chinas\\_military?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/22/think_again_chinas_military?page=full). The important question for an assessment of a military competition in Asia is the amount of resources China is spending to conduct operations against Taiwan, in Korea, or in the South China Sea, measured against the resources the United States is investing in the types of forces that would be useful in those contingencies. From this perspective, much of the U.S. defense budget is more or less irrelevant to the kinds of engagements the United States will be a part of in Asia.



PLA has been acquiring submarines at a rate of approximately three per year for more than a decade. The PLAN's 60-plus submarines—both conventional and nuclear—are increasingly quiet and growing in number. While China has been modernizing its military, the United States has been shrinking its forces in the Asia-Pacific region. Since 1995, the U.S. Navy has cut its total submarine fleet by about 30%, down from 100 boats to 71. Tactical submarines suffered the greatest, with their ranks shrinking from 82 to 57 during that time. Over the next decades, the steady-state number for the United States will probably be around 48. Though U.S. submarines are more capable, there is almost no chance that they will all be in or near the Pacific or could all deploy to the Pacific at the onset of a crisis. Furthermore, China has an added advantage: many of its submarines do not actually need to be capable to have operational effects. According to Lyle Goldstein and William Murray of the Naval War College:

PLAN submarines will attempt to make use of their superior numbers to offset the qualitatively superior U.S. submarine fleet. Thus, older and less sophisticated submarines will likely be employed to screen the higher-value assets. Chinese sources openly describe using certain submarines as “bait.”...Employing this tactic, it is conceivable that U.S. submarines could reveal their own presence to lurking Kilos by executing attacks against nuisance Mings and Romeos.<sup>40</sup>

Although numbers matter—particularly given that China seems ready to use its numerical advantages in its theater in the ways described above—numbers are certainly not all that matters. The trend of force investments is critical as well. China has a focused program to develop coercive military capabilities combined with abilities to interdict U.S. forces and attack U.S. weaknesses. In contrast, U.S. military investments have not addressed these capabilities. The United States has been investing in counterinsurgency forces for most of the decade—capabilities that do not well translate into high-end air and naval engagements. This means that not only are the equipment purchases relevant to a potential conflict in Asia underfunded (e.g., submarines, maritime patrol, penetrating and persistent strike), but Asia-Pacific-relevant training and doctrine also are suffering. It has been a long time since the U.S. military has had to think about a conflict in which it may lose a ship, sailors, aircraft, and airmen. Just because the United States has more historical experience in fighting and winning major sea and air engagements does not mean that current U.S. forces, engaged as they are in counterinsurgency operations, are structured or prepared for those kinds of fights. In

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<sup>40</sup> Lyle Goldstein and William Murray, “Undersea Dragons: China’s Maturing Submarine Force,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004), 191.

contrast, Chinese force investments have been optimized for a war over Taiwan with U.S. forces, or for a series of high-end missile, aerospace, and naval engagements.

*Alliance Politics and Perceptions and the Possible Use of Force*

Under what conditions will U.S. allies fight alongside each other and the United States? At first glance, the United States and its allies seem to have an overwhelming edge over China. All U.S. allies are modernizing their militaries, with most investing in maritime reconnaissance as well as in strike and undersea capabilities. The United States' key ally, Japan, on whom Washington relies to project power in the region, is focused on improving its land- and sea-based ballistic and air defenses, as well as its undersea force.<sup>41</sup> Japan's already-capable Air Self-Defense Force is looking to upgrade its fighter fleet, perhaps by acquiring the stealthy F-35, and may in the future develop the means for precision strike at longer ranges, given its acquisitions of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft, and munitions such as the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM).

Singapore and Australia in particular have advanced capabilities well-suited for sea lane protection missions. With a fleet of F-16s and F-15s equipped with or complemented by advanced C4ISR, targeting, precision-guided munitions, AEW capabilities, and refueling tankers, Singapore has one of the most advanced air forces in Asia. The Republic of Singapore Air Force is set to acquire the stealthy F-35 as well, which will enhance its ability to operate against complex air defenses. Singapore's naval fleet includes stealth frigates equipped with Harpoons, as well as four conventional submarines (with two more on the way). Together, Singapore's air force and navy can pack a punch in responding to threats to regional sea lanes of communication.

Australia, already well-equipped to conduct maritime surveillance and strike missions, is beefing up its forces by doubling purchases of conventional submarines and by acquiring 100 F-35s. In the next decade, it will be well-positioned to defend sea lanes in the South China Sea and the Malacca and Lombok straits.

But when and how will any of these militarily capable countries join a fight? Japan, for example, may be eager to engage in robust peacetime engagements to clear its territorial waters of PLA surface ships and submarines. Responding to an attack on Taiwan, particularly if Japan itself is not attacked, may be a whole other matter.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Bitzinger, "Military Modernization," 98.

<sup>42</sup> Arguably, if Japan was seriously contemplating participating in a conflict over Taiwan, it would spend some resources on hardening and defending its fixed-wing bases.

If China conducts an unprovoked attack that looks like an opening gambit to change the regional balance of power, then perhaps Canberra, Singapore, and Tokyo would do what they could to help defeat PRC forces. Today, it is just as easy to imagine that they would be reluctant to participate. Even if they did, however, Asia has no mechanism to coordinate strategies, policies, and force engagements. There is no shared doctrine or standard protocols for crisis response. Even worse, there is still a great degree of distrust among and between U.S. allies—Japan and South Korea do not trust each other, nor do many nations in Southeast Asia. In many conflict scenarios the alliances are less than the sum of their parts. Robert Ross was correct when he argued that

East Asia possesses plentiful offshore assets that enable the United States to maintain a robust military presence, to contend with a rising China and to maintain a favorable balance of power. The U.S. alliance with Japan and its close strategic partnership with Singapore provide Washington with key naval and air facilities essential to regional power projection. The United States also has developed strategic cooperation with Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Each country possesses significant port facilities that can contribute to U.S. capabilities during periods of heightened tension, whether it be over Taiwan or North Korea.<sup>43</sup>

But for the reasons described above, he is correct only to a point. Finally, even if allies were inclined to support U.S. operations, China can take out most of these naval and air facilities before the countries where they reside have a chance to make any strategic decisions.

Perhaps Washington's greatest strategic hope is India, which has the potential to become Washington's most powerful partner in maintaining a regional balance. India shares U.S. concerns about Chinese activity in and along the Indian Ocean. It is building or acquiring the submarines, surface ships, and reconnaissance capabilities to project more power in the Indian Ocean and appears to want to project naval power from Aden to Singapore. But whether and under what conditions India would participate in a Sino-U.S. clash is a mystery (as is U.S. participation or support for India in a Sino-Indian clash).<sup>44</sup> Perhaps just its presence and growing capability will be enough to help keep China from dominating East Asia and the region's maritime entry points. India's future role in an Asian balance may be as important as China's ability to realize its apparent aspirations. But how New Delhi will play that role is at this point unknowable.

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<sup>43</sup> Friedberg and Ross, "Here Be Dragons."

<sup>44</sup> On India's military modernization, see Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming Without Aiming: India's Military Modernization* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), particularly chap. 4. See also Bitzinger, "Military Modernization."

It would be a mistake to add up the capabilities of U.S. allies and the base access that they could provide to U.S. forces and declare the United States supreme. Rather, given the manifold political considerations that U.S. allies must consider, they should be looked at as contingent assets that require higher levels of strategic management before Washington can add them to the net sum of deterrence.

As discussed in the first section, the study of the Sino-U.S. competition is particularly prone to analytical traps. That is mostly because, on first glance, the United States and its allies seem to have so much more power and capability than China. But some built-in Chinese advantages—geography, the PRC’s growing importance in the international system, and its focus of effort—begin to paint a different picture. Moreover, Chinese doctrine—in particular, Beijing’s ideas of how to take advantage of perceived U.S. weaknesses in a military conflict—may matter more than the overwhelming capability of U.S. and allied forces on paper. Alliance capabilities, while valuable, only matter if they are used, and if they can be used together effectively. An assessment of the military balance in Asia structured around the above issues can begin to provide policymakers with useful information about the country’s relative position in the security competition.

## **Conclusion**

This essay attempted to do four things. First, it analyzed why assessing the balance of military power between China and the United States is important. Second, it argued that strategic analysis informed by the work of “net assessors” is a useful way to structure a balance assessment. Third, the essay analyzed the clashing political objectives that will define the military competition between the two countries. And fourth, it offered some initial thoughts on how to think about and structure an assessment of the Sino-U.S. military balance.

The Sino-U.S. military balance matters only insofar as it relates to advancing and defending U.S. and Chinese political objectives (e.g., a massive Chinese build-up in peacekeeping forces would minimally affect the military competition). For the United States, the most important characteristics of the rivalry are those that impinge on Washington’s ability to shape, in ways consistent with U.S. interests, what is fast becoming the world’s key region. These interests include protecting the homeland from enemies who might threaten it from the Pacific Ocean; preventing the dominance of Asia by a hostile hegemon; providing the “security space” for Asian allies (and non-allies) to continue to embrace the liberal economic and political order as their

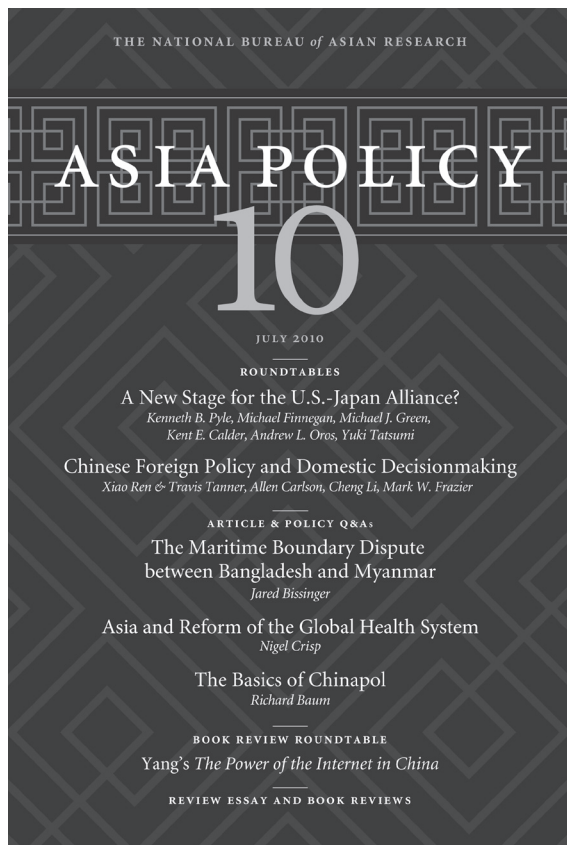
path to modernization; and continued access to, and (when needed) dominance of, the commons consistent with U.S. global requirements. These goals must be assessed against China's growing ability to coerce U.S. allies, interdict U.S. forces en route to the region, and cut off U.S. access to critical parts of the global commons in a possible bid for regional hegemony. For Washington, a balance assessment must first ask who can better achieve its primary goals. Assessors also need to analyze Beijing's perception of how China is performing in military competition with Washington, trends relating to force investments and doctrine relevant to possible conflicts, and issues of alliance politics, perceptions, doctrines, and force structure that directly relate to a variety of conflict scenarios.

It is a mistake to believe that focusing on the competitive aspects of Sino-U.S. relations should not preclude cooperation between China and the United States. To the contrary, if analysts can give policymakers a better picture of where the country stands in a military competition, unfounded fears can be put to rest and fears with foundation can be remediated. Successfully competing with China militarily not only will help enhance deterrence and avoid conflict; it could also help push Beijing away from destabilizing actions that many inside China do not want.

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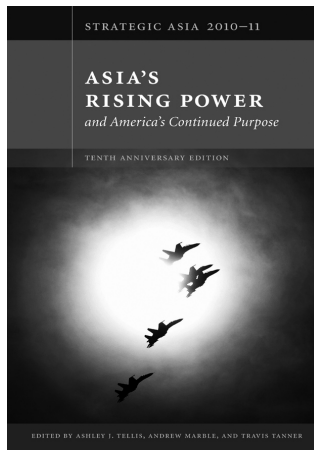
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