

# THREAT INFLATION AND THE CHINESE MILITARY

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# Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military

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Cover Photo: Soldiers of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy patrol at Woody Island, in the Paracel Archipelago, which is known in China as the Xisha Islands, January 29, 2016. The words on the rock read, "Xisha Old Dragon". Old Dragon is the local name of a pile of rocks near Woody Island (REUTERS/Stringer).



# Executive Summary

Threat inflation is a major problem in evaluating China's military capabilities and the military security-related intentions of China's leadership. With some notable exceptions, U.S. authoritative assessments (and especially nonauthoritative ones) often employ inadequate, distorted, or incorrect evidence, use grossly hyperbolic language, display sloppy or illogical thinking, or rely on broad-brush assertions that seem to derive more from narrow political, ideological, or emotional impulses than from any objective search for truth.

Framing the military challenge Beijing poses in categorical and exceedingly alarmist, worst-case ways removes the need to determine the limits of Chinese threats. China becomes 10 feet tall, undeterred from wanting to destroy the United States except by a massive U.S. counterforce. Such threat inflation also undermines those voices within China that favor moderation, significantly raises the danger of Sino–American crises and military conflict, and diverts huge amounts of U.S. resources away from desperately needed nonmilitary uses at home and abroad.

*In an inflated threat environment, other pressing national security concerns, such as climate change, become secondary and in many cases are interpreted only in the context of a grand “great power competition” between the U.S. and China.*

In such an environment, historical disputes over Taiwan, or maritime issues in the South China Sea, become fundamental zero-sum strategic struggles requiring ever-more forceful pushback. All this closes off opportunities for mutual accommodation or policy moderation, which become labeled as appeasement or worse, and makes it virtually impossible for a U.S. administration to speak publicly about the need, not just the

possibility, for cooperating meaningfully with Beijing on critical issues. In an inflated threat environment, other pressing national security concerns, such as climate change, become secondary and in many cases are interpreted only in the context of a grand “great power competition” between the U.S. and China.

Regardless of the prospects for improving or at least stabilizing the security relationship with China, the United States is not going to build its way out of the current deepening military competition with China, nor develop a successful long-term China strategy based on inflated threats. It will need to accept the logic of balance over dominance in many areas, fashion credible strategies designed both to deter and reassure Beijing in both the regional and global arenas, and strengthen its capacities at home. This will demand a fundamental reassessment of current American policies in the light of realistic assessments of both threats and opportunities, real capacities, and reasonable aspirations. It will also involve some risks. But the alternatives would generate far worse risks.

This paper outlines a better approach. Instead of inflating the Chinese military threat, Washington should:

- Produce more balanced, fact-based assessments of China’s capabilities and intentions, reject the inflated rhetoric of former officials and outside pundits.
- Work to create a more stable and in many ways more cooperative balance in the Western Pacific. Over the short to medium term, the U.S. and its allies would best create such a balance in the military realm by transitioning toward a more financially feasible active denial force posture designed to deny China clear control over its maritime periphery without contributing to rapid or severe escalation in a crisis or conflict.
- Strive, over the long-term and in conjunction with China, to create a regional and global system centered on a maximum level of positive-sum interactions, including, among others, cooperative structures, and agreements to address specific common regional and global threats, including climate change,



pandemics, financial instability, cyberattacks, and WMD proliferation. In Asia, this should also include limited collective security arrangements with U.S. allies and partners, China, and possibly other regional nations to ensure the security of SLOCs, combat terrorism, and resolve local disputes and conflicts. This might entail a modification of America's existing security alliances in Asia as part of mutual assurances with Beijing, the revitalization of the One China policy toward Taiwan alongside greater efforts to increase incentives in both Beijing and Taipei to compromise in ways that make possible eventual political talks, greater support for increased defense spending by many Asian states, and an overall defensive-oriented, denial force posture in Asia that minimizes the chances of provocation and inadvertent escalation.

## About the Author

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

Most of Washington and a significant section of the American public have now come to view the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a dire threat in virtually all relevant domains: political, economic, technological, military, and social. Indeed, the world is now viewed in Washington as being primarily defined by a new era of "great power competition" between the United States and China or a larger values-based and threat-laden struggle between "democracy and authoritarianism" represented by those two countries.

This Manichean framing of global politics and strategies is being driven further by the Russia-Ukraine war, which is used by some to link Russia to China even more deeply (given Beijing's rhetorical support for Russia in the conflict), thereby supposedly resulting in an even more threatening autocratic challenge to peace and order.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the perceived threats in each of the above domains are in almost every case being defined in zero-sum terms, usually based on dire estimates of current and projected Chinese capabilities and intentions to do harm. And such threat perceptions are often made worse by references to the supposedly predatory and hostile nature of the Chinese political system and the ideology of the PRC regime.

In various ways, Beijing is thus seen as a vaguely defined existential threat, a rapidly growing military and economic power bent on global domination through predatory trade and investment practices and/or armed coercion, a burgeoning high-tech superpower determined to control the key drivers of growth, a hostile opponent of the existing so-called rules-based international order, and a pernicious threat to democratic societies from within.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in many instances, the alarm over such supposed

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<sup>1</sup> Moyn, Samuel. "How to stop a new Cold War." *Prospect*, April 7, 2022.

<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/essays/how-to-stop-a-new-cold-war>.

<sup>2</sup> Romney, Mitt. "We can't look away from China's existential threat," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2021.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/mitt-romney-china-threat/2021/05/12/9651dcf2-b271-11eb-9059-d8176b9e3798\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/mitt-romney-china-threat/2021/05/12/9651dcf2-b271-11eb-9059-d8176b9e3798_story.html); Brands, Hal, and Jake Sullivan. "China Has Two Paths to Global Domination," *Foreign Policy*. May 22, 2020.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/22/china-superpower-two-paths-global-domination-cold-war/>; House GOP. "The Chinese Government's Predatory Economic and Trade Agenda." House GOP, accessed May 4, 2022.

<https://www.gop.gov/ccpproject/chinese-governments-predatory-economic-and-trade-agenda/>; Ratner, Ely. "Blunting China's Economic Coercion." Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, July 24, 2018.

<https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Ratner-Testimony-SFRC-7.24.18-FINAL>. Jorgensen, Malcolm.

threats is magnified by the claim that Washington had been essentially asleep at the wheel until recently as China worked to undermine the U.S. and democratic societies, or, alternatively, that Beijing has become hugely more threatening under the recent, more aggressive, and repressive leadership of Xi Jinping.<sup>3</sup>

*Extreme threat perceptions have generated equally extreme reactions among most U.S. political leaders, pundits, and many analysts of international relations.*

Less-extreme versions of these threat perceptions eschew any reference to China's political system or ideology as a source of hostile Chinese behavior, stressing instead the unavoidable dangers that China as a rising power poses to the U.S. as the dominant state in a largely anarchic global system of states enjoying no supreme enforcement or mediating power. Such dangers supposedly arise from the inevitable uncertainties each power has regarding the intentions of the other, the presumed steadfast desire of the dominant power to retain its global power position and to protect the central role of its values and norms within the global system, the rising power's desire to alter many of those values and norms to better reflect its interests, and its overall fear that the dominant power will increasingly act to constrain its rise.<sup>4</sup>

Yet despite the near-absence of a recognition of domestic political or ideological factors, even this structural realist argument assumes that Beijing, as a supposedly insecure but growing power, is inevitably driven to undermine and weaken the U.S.

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"China is overturning the rules-based order from within." *The Interpreter*, August 12, 2020.

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-overturning-rules-based-order-within>; Hewitt, Hugh. "Americans must rally against the real threat to our democracy: China." *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/27/china-democracy-biden-trump/>.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell, Kurt, and Ely Ratner. "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations." *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>; Atlantic Council. "The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy." Atlantic Council, 2021.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/the-longer-telegram/>; Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "Deterring PRC Aggression Toward Taiwan." Testimony before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 18, 2021. [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Oriana\\_Skylar\\_Mastro\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Oriana_Skylar_Mastro_Testimony.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer, John. "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics." *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war>; Avery Goldstein observes the development of extreme China threat perceptions over the years. Goldstein, Avery. "China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance." *International Security* 45 (1), 2020. 164–201.

through all possible means to ensure its successful rise to a dominant position in the global order. In this view, although Beijing might not be evil or ideologically hostile, the threat it poses is still seen as extremely dire and inevitably growing, as long as China's economy continues to grow robustly and uncertainty over China's ultimate goals continues to exist.

Unsurprisingly, such extreme threat perceptions have generated equally extreme reactions among most U.S. political leaders, pundits, and many analysts of international relations. The assumed scope and scale of the Chinese threat is seen by these individuals to require a "whole-of-society" response, designed to "push back" against Chinese misbehavior in a variety of ways, from applying tariffs and sanctions to correct China's "predatory" and mercantilist economic and trade policies to building up the U.S. military to deter China's aggressive military or paramilitary actions.<sup>5</sup>

In virtually all areas, zero-sum (i.e., I win, you lose) calls for "severe" competition, pressure, punishment, confrontation, and wholesale or selective decoupling of links with China seem to predominate, with relatively little attention paid to developing specific, concrete ways to moderate or bound the rivalry through various types of understandings or, even less, mutual accommodation or collaboration.<sup>6</sup>

In what appears at first glance to be a significant qualification of such a response, the Biden administration has stated that the U.S. relationship with China will be "competitive

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<sup>5</sup> Glaser, Bonnie. "Time for Collective Pushback against China's Economic Coercion." CSIS, January 13, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/time-collective-pushback-against-chinas-economic-coercion>; Starling, Clementine G., Tyson Wetzel, and Christian Trotti. "Seizing the advantage: A vision for the next US national defense strategy." The Atlantic Council, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/seizing-the-advantage-a-vision-for-the-next-us-national-defense-strategy/>.

<sup>6</sup> Pompeo, Michael. "Communist China and the Free World's Future." Speech, Yorba Linda, Calif., July 23, 2020. U.S. Department of State. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2/index.html>; McMaster, H.R. "How China Sees the World and How We Should See China." *The Atlantic*, May 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/>; Pottinger, Matthew. "Beijing's American Hustle." *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-08-23/beijings-american-hustle>; Friedberg, Aaron. *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*. New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2011; Beckley, Michael, and Hal Brands. "Into the Danger Zone: The Coming Crisis in US-China Relations." American Enterprise Institute, 2021. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/into-the-danger-zone-the-coming-crisis-in-us-china-relations/>; Blackwill, Robert, and Ashley Tellis. "Revising US Grand Strategy toward China." Council on Foreign Relations, 2015. <https://www.cfr.org/report/revising-us-grand-strategy-toward-china>; The two foremost examples of the "resurgent, evil China" argument are presented in the Trump administration's U.S. National Security and National Defense Strategies and in an influential article by two high-level USG officials appearing in Campbell and Ratner. "The China Reckoning."



when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.”<sup>7</sup> This implies that Washington’s policy will include a wide range of approaches to Beijing, at presumably robust levels across the board. But the reality has thus far been quite different.

Although far less reckless and ideological toward Beijing than the Trump administration, the Biden administration has clearly indicated that its predecessor generally correctly assessed the extreme, existential threat posed by China. As a result, the overall framework of the Biden (and congressional) approach to China has continued to stress sharp, values-centered, and largely punitive forms of response to Beijing’s rise and its influence.



Taranto, Puglia – February 8, 2010: Chinese sailors aboard the Type 052B, or Guangzhou class, destroyer (Massimo Todaro / Shutterstock.com).

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<sup>7</sup> Blinken, Antony. “A Foreign Policy for the American People.” Speech, Washington, D.C., March 3, 2021. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

The apparent underlying assumption of this approach is that the threat China poses is so enormous that attempts to reach anything more than narrow understandings, or expand mutually beneficial forms of collaboration with Beijing, by and large serve to divert attention away from the primary objective of “pushing back” in every way possible (Secretary of State Antony Blinken has described the threat as “the greatest geopolitical test of the 21st century.”).<sup>8</sup> In this assumption, constructive engagement has supposedly “failed,” so why continue it? And reinforcing this prevailing Washington viewpoint is the notion that, regardless of how hostile or zero-sum the U.S. approach to Beijing might be, the Chinese will always remain willing to cooperate meaningfully on some issues (such as climate change) when it is in their interests to do so.

All this clearly indicates that certain types of U.S. threat perceptions have made Washington prone to extreme policy reactions in response to various Chinese actions. And those policies can of course in turn cause Beijing to react in various ways, including what are viewed as more (or less) threatening types of action. The possibility of a vicious cycle of worsening, inflated threats and counterthreats emerging from such a dynamic is obvious. In other words, threat inflation can significantly increase the possibility of an otherwise entirely avoidable conflict between the threatened nation and the threatening nation.

This suggests that holding an exaggerated threat perception of China can pose at least as much of a danger to the United States as underestimating it. In addition to the dangerous vicious cycle mentioned above, it can produce wasteful and socially disruptive policies by unnecessarily diverting resources into unproductive areas such as excessive military buildups, and by unnecessarily alarming or panicking the citizenry. This is particularly of concern in the military arena, where an inflated threat almost inevitably leads to excessive commitments of financial, intellectual, and technological resources that could be used elsewhere.

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<sup>8</sup> Blinken, Antony. “A Foreign Policy for the American People.”

Also, inflated threats can be manipulated by opportunistic politicians and other leaders in society, creating still further alarm and supposedly justifying all manner of extreme, unnecessary domestic policies and behavior, including witch hunts for supposed foreign spies, diversion of public attention and resources from more serious threats to the nation, and restrictions on personal liberties.<sup>9</sup> And inflated threats can also alarm third-party nations, and place unnecessary pressure on them to back one or the other of the two nations involved in the vicious cycle of threat escalation. Finally, threat inflation can greatly reduce incentives for countries to cooperate fully where their interests might otherwise align.

*Holding an exaggerated threat perception of China can pose at least as much of a danger to the United States as underestimating it.*

Many if not all of these dynamics are evident in the U.S.–China relationship. The People’s Republic of China is doubtless acting to weaken U.S. influence in some areas, challenges (both directly and indirectly) U.S. interests on specific issues, and at times resorts to unethical, illegal, or international norm-violating behavior. However, in many instances the nature and scope of the military and other threats it poses has been significantly distorted, exaggerated, and used for political effect.

Correctly estimating the sorts of threats that China poses to the United States is clearly critical when determining the policies and strategies that Washington should pursue to protect its interests, which presumably includes avoiding unnecessary confrontation or, worse yet, conflict with Beijing.

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<sup>9</sup> Hawley, Josh. “Senator Hawley Gives Floor Speech on Reforming the Global Economy, Preventing China’s Domination.” <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/senator-hawley-gives-floor-speech-reforming-global-economy-preventing-chinas-domination>; Kline, Phelim. “A heartland GOP primary battle goes all-in on bashing China.” *Politico*, February 16, 2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/16/a-heartland-gop-primary-battle-china-00009095>; Kheel, Rebecca. “Navy secretary nominee pledges to be ‘exclusively focused on the China threat.’” *The Hill*, July 13, 2021. <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/562762-navy-secretary-nominee-pledges-to-be-exclusively-focused-on-the-china-threat/>; Lee, Jessica. “DOJ needs to investigate past discrimination against Asian Americans.” *Responsible Statecraft*, February 24, 2022. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/02/24/doj-needs-to-investigate-past-discrimination-against-asian-americans/>



Unfortunately, threat estimates are often subject to many factors that can distort both the measurement of a threat and the policy-related conclusions that stem from that estimate. These factors extend well beyond simple errors in measuring a potential adversary's capabilities. They include, for example, faulty historical analogies or lessons; psychological, societal, and cultural predispositions toward threat inflation; the misreading of statements and signals and the lessons of past interactions; public opinion; and narrow individual or group financial or political interests. Moreover, in assessing the threats posed by other countries, few policymakers, analysts, or commentators address the highly interactive nature of threat perceptions over time.

This report does not examine the full range of inflated threats and corresponding U.S. threat perceptions that China might pose to the United States. Although such a study is definitely called for, it is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, this report focuses on the most obvious and dangerous type of threat any nation can pose to another: a military-based (or so-called hard power) security threat.

Analysis of such a threat would seem rather straightforward and relatively easy, involving measurements of the number, sophistication, capabilities, etc. of Chinese weapons systems, logistics systems, training, experience in combat, warfighting doctrine, etc. Yet in reality, many of the complex subjective and objective factors influencing these threat perceptions operate to a high degree, potentially skewing estimates of both military capabilities and intentions in highly unrealistic directions.

As this report shows, due to these factors, many individuals in and out of the U.S. government apparently operate from highly problematic assumptions and assessments regarding both the underlying nature of various hard power threats in general, and the specific nature of the military threats posed by China.

The latter derive in particular from misreadings or distortions of Chinese motives and behavior (and in some cases, mistranslations of Chinese terms and speeches), the failures of past U.S. China policy, the most vital U.S. interests involving China, and the

range of options available to U.S. policymakers in devising and implementing U.S. China policy.

The report begins by examining the concept of threats, threat perceptions, and intentions as discussed in both historical and theoretical works in the field of international relations, political culture, and political psychology. Overall, such scholarly assessments show that, on balance, political leaders and societies, and in some ways Americans in particular, are generally prone to inflating threats. This analysis also suggests that decision-makers can inflate military threats even when subordinate government agencies provide reasonably accurate threat assessments. While such scholarly observations do not prove specific cases of threat inflation regarding the Chinese military, they do strongly suggest that the propensity for leaders and observers in the United States to inflate such threats is very high.

*Many individuals in and out of the U.S. government apparently operate from highly problematic assumptions and assessments regarding... the nature of the military threats posed by China.*

The report then presents an assessment of how China's military threat has been portrayed in both authoritative and nonauthoritative U.S. sources, including official Defense Department and national security documents, congressional documents, speeches by U.S. leaders, reports by major U.S. think tanks, and mass media sources.<sup>10</sup> These portrayals are evaluated based on evidence provided by experienced, long-term People's Liberation Army (PLA) specialists; Chinese actions, statements, and policies; and, in some cases, simple logic.

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<sup>10</sup> Authoritative sources are those that are commonly viewed as conveying the official policy stance and assessments of the United States government, including presidential and executive branch foreign policy statements and documents, formal speeches, and reports. Nonauthoritative sources cover a wide spectrum, from the views of former U.S. civilian and military officials to those of think tank analysts, op-eds by experts, and scholarly analysis. Congressional views and actions cover a gray area between authoritative and nonauthoritative sources, given the limited authority of the Congress in determining U.S. foreign policy but its considerable influence over the policy process and decision-making, via the holding of hearings, its control of the purse, and its passage of laws and mandating of reports relevant to foreign policy.

This is followed by an examination of the likely future evolution of China's military capabilities and intentions, and their implications for American interests.

The report concludes with thoughts on how U.S. and allied security policies and military strategies should proceed based on a more accurate and balanced overall assessment of the Chinese military threat. It concludes that, on balance, the best approach to dealing with the military threats that China poses does not require a major buildup of U.S. military capabilities, even in Asia, and most certainly does not require futile efforts to regain U.S. military predominance in that region. Instead, such an approach requires sustained efforts to end inflated, zero-sum rhetoric, set clear red lines, stabilize emerging military balances, and increase incentives to reach positive-sum security outcomes wherever possible.

# The propensity toward threat inflation

Determining the existence and nature of a threat is a complex and subjective process to which both the threatening and the threatened parties contribute. The former in most cases engages in one or more actions or holds capabilities and views that can be regarded as threatening, and the latter concludes that such actions, capabilities, and views do in fact constitute a threat.

In this interaction, the latter element is critical to assessing the appropriate actions in response to a threat, and the implications of those actions for personal, institutional, national, international, etc. safety and order. It becomes even more critical given the possibility that the “threatened” party can perceive and act on a supposed threat even absent any clearly threatening behavior. The perception of a threat, regardless of whether that threat is in any objective sense real, is key to the entire process. As Janice Gross Stein states: “Threats do not unambiguously speak for themselves. Understanding the meaning of threats is mediated by the perception of the target.”<sup>11</sup>

A military security threat is by no means a simple function of estimates made of the size, sophistication, and sustainability of a potential adversary’s military forces, as some analysts apparently believe.<sup>12</sup>

Overall, a military threat derives from a complex set of factors that include both objective and subjective assessments not only of a potential adversary’s current and likely future military capabilities, but also its political and strategic intentions regarding the use of those (and other) capabilities. It is untenable to argue, as some analysts do, that assessments of another nation’s intentions (and the motives underlying them) play no role in threat perceptions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stein, Janice G. “Threat Perception in International Relations.” *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology 2nd ed.* Eds. Huddy, Leonie, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> As Stein has pointed out, threat is “conveniently equated to power, largely to military power, and scholars move easily from ‘objective’ measures of power to threat assessment, assuming equivalence between the two.”

<sup>13</sup> One strong advocate for the notion that any nation’s intentions are impossible to ascertain with certainty and that they therefore play a negligible role in threat perceptions is Sebastian Rosato. Rosato, Sebastian. *Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict.* New Haven, Conn. Yale University Press, 2021. He argues instead that the balance of power based on assessments of a nation’s relative capabilities is virtually the only sure basis for measuring a national security threat. Rosato’s view, which is fundamental to the argument of structural offensive realists, has been heavily criticized and cast into doubt by a variety of

The absence of post–World War II military balancing among the major industrial democracies clearly suggests that it plays an important role.<sup>14</sup> More broadly, the importance of threat perceptions associated with intentions derives from the historical fact, discussed by advocates of defensive realism and constructivist theories, that democratic and nondemocratic states have shown incentives to convey assurances to one another intended to reduce the perceived need for costly, provocative forms of security competition deriving from worst-case assessments of capability and intent. Those assurances include cooperative agreements such as arms control treaties and confidence-building measures.<sup>15</sup>

The real issue is not whether but how intentions influence threat perceptions, under what circumstances, and to what degree, and how intentions relate to capabilities, especially in the context of the security and status dilemmas. Specifically, a military threat derives from the perceptions and resulting assessments of the capacity and willingness or intent of a nation to inflict physical harm on the people, territory, and resources of one or more other nations, to undermine or weaken the vital interests of one or more such nations, or to compel or deter one or more such nations in unacceptable ways using military force. Such capacity and intention can be latent or manifest, sudden or gradually emerging, and imminent or distant. A military threat can be directed at only one nation or groups of allied nations. And the intensity or gravity of a military security threat can span a spectrum from existential to marginal.

Clearly, the existence of a specific military threat in the minds of the leaders and citizens of a nation depends on the subjective judgments of those making the threat assessment (including senior policymakers and the intelligence community) and the reactions of the broader public to those assessments, as well as both elite and public

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scholars and other theories and approaches to international relations. These include defensive realism, constructivism, the tenets of some theories of political culture, and the implications of studies of human psychology, the main findings of which are summarized below.

<sup>14</sup> Walt, Stephen M. "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power." *International Security* 9 (4), 1985. 3–43.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540>; Waltz, Kenneth N. "Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power." *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Mass. Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1979. 102–128.

<sup>15</sup> Stein, in "Threat Perception in International Relations," notes that only in the past several decades have scholars begun to look seriously at intention as a source of threat that is independent of military capabilities, and build models that focus explicitly on intention in their explanations of the causes of war; Walt. "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power." 3–43.



judgments based largely on media coverage. The mere presence of a potentially dangerous set of military capabilities or even the expression of an intent to do harm, for example, might not be taken by the potential object of such a threat (i.e., the leaders and populace of a nation or nations) as credible or serious. Conversely, as suggested above, a nation or nations can conclude that they are militarily threatened absent any strong outward signs of such a threat, such as imposing military capabilities.



April 18, 2018: China's aircraft carrier Liaoning takes part in a military drill of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in the western Pacific Ocean (REUTERS/Stringer).

Moreover, since the perception of a military or other threat to a nation involves many different individuals, including regional experts, political leaders, intelligence analysts, and the public, it is in a sense a socially constructed phenomenon involving private conversations among a variety of such individuals.<sup>16</sup>

A military threat assessment of intentions and capabilities, as with any threat assessment, derives from many types of information and inputs associated with these

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<sup>16</sup> Meyer, C.O. "International terrorism as a force of homogenization? A constructivist approach to understanding cross-national threat perceptions and response." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22, 2009. 647–666; Stein. "Threat Perception in International Relations."

actors. Most obviously, in the military realm, these include classified and unclassified intelligence reports, documents and speeches issued by the target country, and statements and direct observations of the military systems and activities of the target country originating from a variety of official and unofficial sources, located both inside and outside of the target country. Threat assessments also derive from the historical record of the potential adversary's past use of military force, as interpreted by scholars, analysts, and officials.

The national leadership or government organization that produces a threat assessment will also employ or be influenced by relevant domestic inputs, in the form of authoritative statements of national interest, strategy (including both broad geostrategic and narrower political and economic goals), and the policies designed to achieve them, as well as the stated goals and priorities of individual service arms and government bureaucracies.

These relatively conventional, core documentary, and historical estimates (often involving quantitative measurements of weapons systems, support systems, and logistical structures) and the threat assessments that derive from them are also heavily influenced by many more subjective variables that contribute to the overall social construct of threat perception. These variables include:<sup>17</sup>

- Certain types of identity-, ideology-, or history-based predispositions or images of one's own society or culture and of "outsiders" in general, or a specific nation-state relevant to security perceptions.
- The personality traits, prejudices, beliefs, and political calculations of individual leaders and threat analysts.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hopf, Ted. *Social Construction of International Politics*. New York. Columbia University Press, 2002; Hermann, Margaret G. "Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior Using the Personal Characteristics of Political Leaders." *International Studies Quarterly* 24 (1), 1980. 7–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600126>; Rousseau, David L. *Identifying Threats and Threatening Identities: The Social Construction of Realism and Liberalism*. Stanford, Calif. Stanford University Press, 2006. Rousseau observes that identity conditions threat assessments so strongly that the material balance of power becomes less important; Meyer, in "International terrorism as a force of homogenization?" says that "especially important in processes of individual perception are emotional states, information processing, and patterns of inference and attribution."

<sup>18</sup> Hermann. "Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior Using the Personal Characteristics of Political Leaders."

- Various emotional and psychological factors that influence how individuals and groups perceive the intensity, scope and nature of a specific threat or threats in general and the means available in responding to that threat.
- The organizational outlooks and interests of defense analysts, defense-industry elites, and political leaders.

Analysis of these variables has produced a range of conclusions regarding threat perceptions and responses to threats by individuals, societies, and national leaders. Taken as a whole, these conclusions strongly suggest the prevalence in making threat assessments of subjective biases, simplistic interpretations of threats, threat inflation, and an overreaction to perceived threats. They include:

- Limits in the ability of humans to process information, leading to cognitive shortcuts intended “to simplify complexity and manage uncertainty, handle information, make inferences, and generate threat perceptions.” These are reinforced by psychological aversions to ambiguity, dissonance, and difficulties in accurately assessing probabilities. This can produce simplistic characterizations of the nature, scope, and implications of a perceived threat.<sup>19</sup>
- The overall tendency of individuals (especially political experts and probably political leaders) to select for confirmatory evidence of their existing beliefs, and to cling to those beliefs unless faced with virtually overwhelming contradictory evidence, and particularly when they have a high level of confidence in their original belief.<sup>20</sup> This tendency could of course lead either

<sup>19</sup> Stein. “Threat Perception in International Relations”; Dawes, R.M. “Behavioral decision making and judgment.” The handbook of social psychology. Eds. Gilbert, D.T., S.T. Fiske, and G. Lindzey. New York. McGraw–Hill, 1999. 497–548; Tetlock, Philip. *Expert Political Judgment*. Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment*; Taber, Charles S., and Milton Lodge. “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs.” *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (3), 2006. 755–769; Frey, D., and S. Schulz-Hardt. “Confirmation bias in group information seeking and its implications for decision making in administration, business and politics.” *Social influence in social reality: Promoting individual and social change*. Eds. Butera, F., and G. Mugny. Seattle. Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, 2001. 53–73; Moreover, research has also shown that exposure to contradictory information often causes people to strengthen their beliefs. All of this “impairs processes of estimation and assessment.” Stein. “Threat Perception in International Relations,” referencing Anderson, C.A., M.R. Lepper, and L. Ross. “Perseverance of social theories: The role of explanation in the persistence of discredited information.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39 (6), 1980. 1037–1049. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0077720>; Anderson, C.A. “Imagination and expectation: The effect of imagining behavioral scripts on personal influences.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45 (2), 1983. 293–305. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.45.2.293>; Hirt, E.R., and S.J. Sherman. “The role of

to threat inflation or deflation. But given the paranoid style evident in U.S. domestic politics, the former is more likely.

- Emotional traits common to all humans that cause individuals on balance to over-detect threats rather than underestimate them, and to react to fear-inducing threats with caution but to anger-inducing threats with certainty and a greater willingness to run risks. But frightening threats are less likely to succeed when they are designed to compel adversarial leaders to act. Much of the language employed by American analysts toward China suggests an angry, not a fearful, response.<sup>21</sup>
- The fact that people tend to be “risk averse in the domain of gain and risk acceptant in the domain of loss, when they perceive a heightened threat, or when they face the likelihood of loss of something that matters to them.”<sup>22</sup> Regarding U.S. views of China, this would suggest a propensity to take risks in responding to the perceived loss of American military primacy.
- The tendency of political experts and advisers to overestimate the likelihood of threats because “they can easily imagine the causal pathways to war, and pay less attention to the threats that did not lead to war.”<sup>23</sup>
- The historical tendency of policymakers to believe hawkish over dovish advisers, most likely because psychological impulses “incline national leaders to exaggerate the evil intentions of adversaries.”<sup>24</sup>

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prior knowledge in explaining hypothetical events.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 21 (6), 1985. 519–543. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(85\)90023-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(85)90023-X).

<sup>21</sup> Stein. “Threat Perception in International Relations.” 17; Kugler, Tamar, Terry Connolly, and Lisa D. Ordóñez. “Emotion, Decision, and Risk: Betting on Gambles versus Betting on People.” *Journal of Behavioral Decision-Making* 25 (2), 2010. 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.724>; Lerner, J.S., and D. Keltner. “Fear, Anger, and Risk.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81 (1), 2001. 146–159. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.1.146>; for example, research has indicated that “fear prompts uncertainty and risk-averse action, while anger prompts certainty and risk acceptance. Threats that evoke fear, unless they evoke loss avoidance, are likely to prompt hesitancy and a risk-averse response; indeed, that is the purpose of most deterrent threats.” Stein. “Threat Perception in International Relations.” 20.

<sup>22</sup> Stein. “Threat Perception in International Relations.”

<sup>23</sup> Stein. “Threat Perception in International Relations”; Kahneman, Daniel, and Jonathan Renshon. “Why Hawks Win.” *Foreign Policy* 158, January 2007. 36. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/13/why-hawks-win/>; Tversky and Kahneman, 1983; Koehler, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Stein. “Threat Perception in International Relations”; Kahneman and Renshon, “Why Hawks Win.” 36.

- In assessing intentions, political leaders tend to stress their own theories, expectations, and needs as derived from vivid experiences such as personal conversations, or their immediate political interests; in contrast, intelligence analysts rely heavily on the collection and analysis of a potential threat's measurable capabilities.<sup>25</sup>
- The notion that a nation's political culture and identity can require or strongly militate toward a "discourse of danger" in order to provide enduring political legitimacy and social order, especially in nations, such as the United States, that are based on "imagined communities" centered on ideological or moral concepts.<sup>26</sup> This rebuts the notion of many realists that "culture and identity are, at best, derivative of the distribution of capabilities and have no independent explanatory power."<sup>27</sup>
- The general belief, whether true or not, that democratic states are less likely to pose aggressive military threats to and engage in wars with other democratic states, and that authoritarian states are more inclined toward such behavior with regard to any type of regime, given the supposed prevalence within such regimes of ruthless, zero-sum political contests among leaders.<sup>28</sup>
- In the bureaucratic realm, military organizations and defense industries have a vested interest in identifying and countering all manner of threats, most often on a worst-case basis, given their presumed need to produce weapons

<sup>25</sup> Dyson, S.B., and T. Preston. "Individual Characteristics of Political Leaders and the Use of Analogy in Foreign Policy Decision Making." *Political Psychology* 27 (2), 2006. 265–288. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2006.00006.x>; As Ronald R. Krebs argues so persuasively, national security narratives are deeply immersed in politics and can be manipulated and distorted to serve parochial interests. They can close off options and obstruct adaptation to changing realities. And they reduce or close off debates. Krebs, Ronald R. "Puzzles of the Cold War, Lessons for the War on Terror." *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316218969.008>.

<sup>26</sup> Campbell, David. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 1992; Barnett, Michael N. "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East." *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York. Columbia University Press, 1996. Barnett discusses the relationship between state identity and threat perceptions.

<sup>27</sup> Katzenstein, Peter J., ed. *The Culture of National Security*. New York. Columbia University Press, 1996. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Friedberg, Aaron. "Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics." *The National Interest* 114, July 2021. 18–27; Maoz, Zeev, and Bruce Russett. "Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946-1986." *American Political Science Review*, 87 (3), September 1993. 624–638. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938740>; Edsall, Thomas. "The Contract with Authoritarianism." *The New York Times*, April 5, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/05/opinion/trump-authoritarianism-republicans-contract.html>.



and prepare military options covering virtually all conceivable contingencies, even those that are unlikely to occur.<sup>29</sup>

To varying degrees, all these subjective and objective variables influencing threat perceptions and responses to perceived threats operate within the context of pervasive security and status dilemmas that exist among all nations (with the exception of those nations that deliberately seek conflict). Both of these dilemmas can lead to political-military crises and armed conflict, even absent any deliberate intention to generate such outcomes.<sup>30</sup> These dilemmas arise from the absence of an adjudicating sovereign authority over all nations, an inability to know with confidence all the relevant intentions and capabilities of others, and the resulting tendency by all sides to assume the worst about the motives and capabilities of others.

A security dilemma can easily drive a vicious cycle of escalating military tensions as each side undertakes what it considers to be security-enhancing military and other deterrence measures that are interpreted by the other side as threatening, thus prompting its own supposedly defensive deterrence measures, leading to a new cycle of escalation.<sup>31</sup> A status dilemma consists of the same process but in this case involves perceived challenges to status, not security. That is, each side takes actions intended to reassert their status, which are interpreted by the other side as threatening.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hartung, William D. "Profits of War: Corporate Beneficiaries of the Post-9/11 Pentagon Spending Surge". Center for International Policy, 2021.

[https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Profits%20of%20War\\_Hartung\\_Costs%20of%20War\\_Sept%2013%2C%202021.pdf](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Profits%20of%20War_Hartung_Costs%20of%20War_Sept%2013%2C%202021.pdf); Singer, P.W. "Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry and Its Ramifications for International Security." *International Security*, 26 (3), (2001). 186–220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3092094>.

<sup>30</sup> Stein. "Threat Perception in International Relations." 84–96.

<sup>31</sup> Glaser, Charles L., and Chaim Kaufmann. "What is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure it?" *International Security* 22 (4), 1988. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539240>; Jervis, 1978; Glaser, Charles L. "The Security Dilemma Revisited." *World Politics* 50 (1), 1997. 171–201. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054031>; Glaser, Charles L. *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation*. Course Book ed. Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 2010. [muse.jhu.edu/book/36186](http://muse.jhu.edu/book/36186); Kydd, Andrew. "Game Theory and the Spiral Model." *World Politics* 49 (3), 1997. 371–400. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054007>; Kydd, Andrew H. *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*. Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 2005; Booth, Ken, and Nicholas Wheeler. *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics*. Basingstoke. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Tang, Shiping. "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis." *Security Studies* 18 (3), 2009. 587–623. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903133050>; Fearon, James. "Two States, Two Types, Two Actions," *Security Studies* 20 (3), 2011. 431–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.599192>.

<sup>32</sup> Lebow, Richard Ned. "The Past and Future of War." *International Relations* 24 (3), 2010; Wohlforth, William C. "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War." *World Politics* 61 (1), 2009.

While these dilemmas are largely unavoidable between major powers, they can be exaggerated or moderated, sometimes to a high degree, depending largely on variations in threat perceptions, as influenced primarily by the above variables.

*A security dilemma can easily drive a vicious cycle of escalating military tensions as each side undertakes what it considers to be security-enhancing military and other deterrence measures that are interpreted by the other side as threatening.*

Unfortunately, as a whole, many of these subjective factors strongly suggest that security and status dilemmas between nations incline toward the production of negative spirals of security competition involving inflated threat perceptions. This is largely because, as clearly indicated, such factors usually act to enhance suspicion and the assumption of the worst of the motives of others, whether individuals or nations, and reduce efforts to test underlying assumptions or apply rigorous methods in assessing threats.

Such problems are compounded by the apparent tendency of many foreign policy analysts, government officials, and politicians to focus inordinately on the possibility of conflict (a key trait of neorealism) over the probability of conflict, thus leading to worst-case assumptions about the motives of other states.<sup>33</sup>

All these factors play a significant role in U.S. estimates of the military threat posed by China, with regard to both intentions and capabilities. These assessments cover three major areas:

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<sup>33</sup> Brooks, Stephen G. "Dueling Realisms." *International Organization* 51 (3), 1997. 445–477. As Brooks states, "absent the worst case assumption undergirding neorealism, even in an anarchic environment there is no logical reason to infer that balancing behavior will constantly recur and that states will be highly averse to cooperate."

- The level of relative emphasis placed by U.S. defense and intelligence analysts on certain types of Chinese weapons and support systems, and the supposed linkages made between capabilities and intentions.
- The specific interpretation of and relative weight given to the statements made, documents issued, and actions taken by Chinese leaders and military-related agencies, or to the absence of such information.
- The overall political and societal sense of military danger posed by China's very existence and economic development, whether in any clear sense threatening to the U.S. or not.<sup>34</sup>

These three areas of military threat perception of course apply to virtually any country. All nations are prone to threat inflation and overreaction as a result of the psychological and emotional traits of leaders, experts, advisers, and societies summarized above. But the tendency toward threat inflation and overreaction in the U.S.–China relationship, and on the part of the United States in particular, is especially pronounced, for several key additional reasons.

First, the obvious differences in the political systems and ideologies of the two nations incline them toward a high level of mutual suspicion. The People's Republic of China is a one-party dictatorship with a communist and postcolonial nationalist ideology and outlook that regards Western liberal democratic states, and the U.S. in particular, as potentially hostile, predatory threats. This suspicion is augmented by the common Chinese view that Washington is dedicated to maintaining its post–WWII “hegemonic” position within the global order by countering the potential rise to dominance of any other nation, especially a nondemocratic one such as China.<sup>35</sup> All this leads many Chinese to assume that the U.S. does not want China to develop and be able to defend

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<sup>34</sup> Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 1976. 21, 33–34, 80–81. As Jervis states, “leaders might justify their strong sense of threat and the decision to respond to a threat as if they have no choice, i.e., that they were compelled to act by the international environment; this might restrict their search for alternatives.”

<sup>35</sup> Wang Yi. “Resist the Cold War Mentality and Defend True Democracy.” Remarks, Beijing. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 3, 2021. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202112/t20211204\\_10462405.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202112/t20211204_10462405.html); Hong, Chen. “Democracy Summit is an instrument to maintain US hegemony.” *Global Times*, December 7, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1240852.shtml>; Zhao Kejin. “Smear-Beijing drive's goal is to maintain US hegemony.” *China Daily*, January 20, 2022. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202201/20/WS61e8a64ba310cdd39bc8223d.html>.

itself against potentially threatening U.S. military capabilities and will strive to contain, counter, and undermine China's economic growth and military capabilities using both military and nonmilitary means.<sup>36</sup>

The United States is a liberal democracy with a history of struggle against communist states and a long-standing stated commitment to the defense and, where possible, expansion of democracy and individual human rights worldwide.<sup>37</sup> U.S. leaders generally view America as a uniquely influential force for good in the world that justifies an oft-stated U.S. claim to leadership of the "free world." Many American leaders and ordinary citizens believe that a central purpose of U.S. leadership is not only to support existing democratic nations but also to increase their number globally. This is viewed as necessary both for moral reasons relating to individual freedom of choice and because democratic nation-states are presumably less inclined to regard one another with suspicion and hence less likely to become entangled in crises and conflicts over national security concerns.<sup>38</sup>

The U.S. thus regards all rising one-party dictatorships, and a strong PRC in particular, as a threat to its values, its role in the world, and its democratic mission. An expanding, increasingly sophisticated, and powerful Chinese military able to project its capabilities offshore at considerable distances thus intensifies this threat and today constitutes a core element of it.

These contrasting systems and outlooks clearly incline the leaders and publics of both nations toward worst-case assessments of any potential threats that each might pose to the other and thus feed a worsening (i.e., increasingly deliberate and protracted) security competition between them. Although quite evident during the height of the Cold

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<sup>36</sup> Li Yang, Chen Yingqun, and Yifan Xu. "US Attempts to Contain China Doomed." *China Daily*, March 9, 2022. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202203/09/WS6227e36ea310cdd39bc8b499.html>; Moak, Ken. "Why the US is willing to risk almost everything to contain China." China Global Television Network, July 13, 2020. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-13/Why-the-U-S-is-willing-to-risk-almost-everything-to-contain-China-S5BNdo1PAA/index.html>

<sup>37</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order." *Perspectives on Politics* 7 (1), 2009. 71–87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40407217>; Kupchan, Charles. "The Normative Foundations of Hegemony and The Coming Challenge to Pax Americana." *Security Studies* 23 (2), 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, and Michael McFaul. "Should Democracy be Promoted or Demoted?" *Bridging the Foreign Policy Divide*. Eds. Chollet, et al. New York: Routledge, 2007; Wolff, Jonas, and Iris Wurm. "Towards a theory of external democracy promotion." *Security Dialogue* 42 (1), 2011. 77–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0967010610393551>.

War in the 1950s and 1960s, this strong tendency was held in check during the subsequent two decades by a common need for Beijing and Washington to cooperate in balancing against the common, overriding threat posed by the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup>

*Contrasting systems and outlooks clearly incline the leaders and publics of both nations toward worst-case assessments of any potential threats that each might pose to the other and thus feed a worsening security competition between them*

But this tendency has reemerged and become ever-more pronounced since the mid-90s, largely as a result of four factors: 1) the collapse and fragmentation of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s; 2) the emergence of the so-called color revolutions against authoritarian states in the Middle East and Eastern Europe; 3) China's ongoing explosive economic growth and military development; and 4) a variety of U.S. domestic political and economic crises and international missteps (such as the Iraq and Afghanistan debacles) that have weakened the international influence and image of the United States and shaken American confidence. These and other developments have heightened a mutual sense of vulnerability and the threat that each nation supposedly poses to the other.

Second, the tendency toward threat inflation is augmented in both the U.S. and China by the presence of strong self-images or identities that rely heavily on the creation and sustainment of various internal and external supposedly existential dangers to sustain national unity, regime legitimacy, and overall support for the central government.

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<sup>39</sup> Zhongchun, Wang. "The Soviet Factor in Sino-American Normalization, 1969-1979." *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations*. Leiden, The Netherlands. Harvard University Asia Center, 2005. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9781684174201\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9781684174201_007); Goh, Evelyn. "Nixon, Kissinger, and the 'Soviet Card' in the U.S. Opening to China, 1971-1974." *Diplomatic History* 29 (3), June 2005. 475-502. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2005.00500.x>.



This trait is certainly evident in Chinese thinking and policies, as reflected in the emphasis in PRC propaganda on the need for the Chinese nation to remain strong and unified under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in countering both real and imagined cases of foreign interference and threats. The enhanced fear of such threats derives largely from the so-called Century of Humiliation from roughly 1850 to 1949, when China was preyed upon in various ways by imperialist powers. It is also reinforced by a long-standing, historical Chinese fear of increased external threats during times of domestic instability or weakness.<sup>40</sup>

However, this type of self-image is arguably particularly pronounced from an even longer-term historical and political cultural perspective in the United States. Since its founding, U.S. political and social leaders have often employed morality-soaked and at times near-paranoid narratives and discourses that accentuate both domestic and foreign threats. Richard Hofstadter has written of a “paranoid style” in American politics characterized by “a sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, David Campbell has described “discourses of danger” in American foreign policy that date to Puritan times, and which do not necessarily require an actual, discernable threat to emerge and grow. We can see this viewpoint reflected in the simplistic, militarized, and deeply moralistic Cold War narrative conveyed in the primary strategic document of that era, NSC-68, which arguably played a major role in greatly facilitating great increases in executive power and a huge defense bureaucracy.<sup>42</sup>

Scholars have identified this trait as motivated by various cultural, moral, and political factors, usually involving efforts to define more clearly the uniquely democratic and freedom-oriented nature of the American “experiment,” to provide unity and coherence to a nation built upon such abstract ideals and values (as opposed to clear racial, ethnic, or geographic criteria), and to build support for the central government among a people to some extent inherently suspicious of excessive state power. Presumably, the more

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<sup>40</sup> Kaufman, Alison. “The ‘Century of Humiliation,’ Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order.” *Pacific Focus* 25 (1), April 2010. 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2010.01039.x>; Zheng Wang. *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Hofstadter, Richard. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

<sup>42</sup> Campbell. *Writing Security*; Krebs. “Puzzles of the Cold War.”

ominous and severe the threats to these objectives, the more cohesive and supportive of America's moral and political goals (and the role of the government in defending them) the people will become.<sup>43</sup> The tendency toward threat inflation under such conditions is obvious.

This paranoid tendency in U.S. thinking has arguably become more pronounced as Americans have become more concerned about the future. Political polarization, dysfunction and social upheaval resulting from increasing racial tensions stimulated by backlash to immigration from nonwhite countries, the negative reaction to globalization among the American working class, the explosion of hostile, polarizing narratives on social media, the stagnation of the middle class, rising income inequality, and the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis have together created enormous insecurities and uncertainties about the future strength and prosperity of America and its role in the world. These domestic anxieties, compounded by the rise of China and (to a lesser extent) other economic power centers such as Japan and Europe, have cast doubt, in the minds of many Americans, on the continued ability of the U.S. to lead globally, and to protect and reassure both America and America's friends and allies militarily and economically.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Campbell. *Writing Security*.

<sup>44</sup> According to Pew Research Center, 72% of Americans share the view that the U.S. is not a good model of democracy. Wike, Richard, *et al.* "What People Around the World Like—and Dislike—About American Society and Politics." Pew Research Center, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/11/01/what-people-around-the-world-like-and-dislike-about-american-society-and-politics/>; Since the 2008 financial crisis, Americans' overall confidence in their country's military and economic power declined. Pew Research Center. "Public Uncertain, Divided Over America's Place in the World." Pew Research Center, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/05/05/8-perceptions-of-u-s-global-power-and-respect/>.



Two U.S. Air Force B-1B Lancers fly a 10-hour mission from Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, through the South China Sea, June 8, 2017 (U.S. Air Force photo/Tech. Sgt. Richard P. Ebensberger).

Such insecurity has in turn caused many U.S. political leaders to seek domestic support, and to mobilize defense and other resources, by exaggerating and distorting the genuine threats and challenges posed by both supposedly corrupt domestic economic elites and foreign forces such as China. In the process, some U.S. leaders have ignored or downplayed the need to overcome bipartisan differences and find meaningful ways for the U.S., China, and other countries to cooperate to solve a growing array of common problems, such as global warming, pandemics, WMD proliferation, and the state of the global financial system.<sup>45</sup> For many leaders, the emphasis is on forging bipartisan coalitions primarily to counter China.

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<sup>45</sup> Wong, Scott. "Trump, GOP go all-in on anti-China strategy." *The Hill*. May 23, 2020. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/499270-trump-gop-go-all-in-on-anti-china-strategy/>; For example, see statements such as this that appear in congressional ads: "It is us versus China, and instead of taking them on, Washington is wasting our time in stupid fights." Manchester, Julia. "Tim Ryan launches \$3.3 million ad buy." *The Hill*. March 29, 2022. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/600150-tim-ryan-launches-33-million-ad-buy/>.

A third reason for threat inflation in the United States derives from the mutually reinforcing influence of recent historical experience and both political and economic interests. As historian Stephen Wertheim argues, even prior to entering WWII, U.S. leaders had decided that, to ensure the security of the nation and prevent future authoritarian powers from threatening the homeland, American political, economic, and especially military power must become global in scope and to the greatest extent possible unchallengeable.<sup>46</sup> Although doubtless benefiting some U.S. allies and partners, this need for primacy inevitably involves considerable financial and political costs and trade-offs for the United States. Hence, maintaining political support for such a policy in a robust American democracy requires a public fully alerted to the scope and nature of the supposedly continuous dangers the nation faces.

All this naturally inclines U.S. leaders toward an inflated sense of both domestic and foreign threats. During the Cold War, such an orientation was of course facilitated by the early threats to U.S. allies and other noncommunist nations posed by events in Asia and Europe, most notably in the form of the victory of the communists in Eastern Europe and China, as well as the Korean War and the Berlin Crisis. These and other events reinforced the image of a supposedly unified communist order spanning much of Eurasia and endangering postcolonial and weakened postwar developing and developed states alike. Some of the resulting examples of threat inflation during the Cold War involved the fictitious U.S.–Soviet missile gap of the 60s, the notorious “red scare” and McCarthyism, inflated fears of the implications of socialist parties rising to power in Japan and elsewhere in Asia and Europe, and the open-ended and explosive nuclear arms race.<sup>47</sup> While the security dilemma undoubtedly played a role in much of this, threat inflation arguably greatly enhanced its operation and made it more dangerous.

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<sup>46</sup> Wertheim, Stephen. *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Renshon, Jonathan. “Assessing Capabilities in International Politics: Biased Overestimation and the Case of the Imaginary ‘Missile Gap.’” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32 (1), 2009; Michaels, Jonathan. *McCarthyism: The Realities, Delusions, and Politics Behind the 1950s Red Scare*. New York. Routledge, 2017; Schaller, Michael. *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1985; Brogi, Alessandro. “Ending Grand Alliance Politics in Western Europe: US Anti-Communism in France and Italy 1944–47.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 53 (1), 2018; Plous, S. “Perceptual Illusions and Military Realities: The Nuclear Arms Race.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 29 (3), 1985. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002785029003001>.

America's commitment to performing a global security role in the face of an often-inflated threat naturally demanded a high level of defense spending and an expanding military presence overseas, the latter starting from U.S. post-WWII occupation forces in Europe and Japan. This led to the infamous "military-industrial complex" domestically and the creation of hundreds of U.S. overseas bases across the globe, along with various U.S.-led alliances and collective security structures such as NATO and the Asian "hub-and-spokes" network of U.S. bilateral alliances with key Asian states.<sup>48</sup>

Such developments (and in particular the "military-industrial complex") generated concerns over the excessive influence exerted on U.S. politics and society of defense industrial interests and outlooks, a concern highlighted by President Dwight Eisenhower upon leaving office in 1961.<sup>49</sup> Since that time, U.S. defense spending has generally steadily climbed (despite some temporary dips), reaching a level of close to \$1 trillion today when all relevant costs are included, equaling roughly 3 to 4 percent of GDP each year.<sup>50</sup> Such spending has naturally created strong political incentives for every U.S. state to obtain its share of the defense dollar, thus locking in a continuous effort to preserve local defense industries and jobs through sustained, high defense budgets, linked to both real and imagined threats.<sup>51</sup>

Fourth, the liberal democratic nature of American society and its largely unregulated, profit-driven media place an inordinately high premium on political elites and businesspeople competing to guide, lead, and in some cases manipulate public

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<sup>48</sup> None of this assumes the absence of any reasonable reasons for the U.S. to sustain some type of overseas military presence after WWII. The question is whether the size and scope of that presence was justified, or grossly excessive, largely as a result of an inflated threat perception of the USSR and the PRC.

<sup>49</sup> Eisenhower originally wanted to include the U.S. Congress in the term he coined, as the key enabler of the growing military-industrial behemoth. See Hartung, William. "Eisenhower's Warning: The Military-Industrial Complex Forty Years Later." *World Policy Journal* 18 (1), 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2021 Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security; Hartung, William, and Mandy Smithberger. "America's Defense Budget is Bigger than You Think." *The Nation*. May 7, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/tom-dispatch-america-defense-budget-bigger-than-you-think/>.

<sup>51</sup> One of course cannot simply conclude from this that the threat perceptions of U.S. politicians are dictated by the needs of the defense-industrial complexes resident in their localities. However, there is little doubt that the political need to sustain or expand employment in their constituencies, when combined with the economic interests of major defense industries (and their contributions to the coffers of various politicians), incline many political leaders to support sustained or expanded levels of defense spending and hence to be receptive to the heightened levels of threat assessments and perceptions needed to justify such expenditures. Resisting those assessments in many (not all) cases involves a willingness by U.S. politicians to take what might be regarded by many as unreasonable domestic political risks.



perceptions for narrow political and commercial ends. Although this can certainly be overstated (e.g., some U.S. businesspeople and elites promote foreign policy restraint), the open and often free give-and-take of political and commercial competition in America's post-World War II "national security state" environment and the U.S. public's general support for a strong, dominant military can encourage criticism of voices urging more nuanced, restraint-oriented approaches to potential external threats.

In addition, the mainstream media unintentionally but frequently reinforces such criticisms by relying heavily on foreign policy commentary on mainstream proponents of U.S. global leadership, primacy, and the notion of America as an indispensable global police force. Many of these individuals served in Cold War era or post-Cold War U.S. administrations and hence have little reason to acknowledge, much less question, the underlying forces driving threat inflation.

These criticisms and media preferences can discourage the expression of more balanced threat assessments and instead give full play to supposedly dire, zero-sum, purely threat-based evaluations of the challenges posed by other countries. Such a phenomenon is evident in the current U.S. characterization of China as an overall threat to the United States, and in particular as a military threat, as the next section clearly shows.

# China's military capabilities, intentions, and beliefs

As indicated above, assessments of China as a military threat to the United States and larger U.S. interests in Asia and beyond are influenced by many factors, both objective (focusing mainly but not solely on military capabilities) and subjective (focusing mainly on intentions and motivations), and involving sets of assumptions or mindsets derived from history, culture, human psychology, etc. Such assessments are also influenced by the interactive dynamic of the security and status dilemmas, in which U.S. military-related actions can alter or expand Chinese military behavior in ways that deepen the sense of threat.

This section examines the U.S. analysis and assessments of China as a military threat, including both authoritative and nonauthoritative or nongovernmental sources. Among these sources, authoritative U.S. government (and especially DoD) assessments are most likely of primary importance in determining the presence, size, and nature of possible threat inflation as it exists in the minds of U.S. policymakers.

However, nonauthoritative assessments also exert a significant effect on public opinion and the overall impressions and beliefs of those who advise and seek to influence the U.S. government at various levels, from lower-level analysts, to mid-level officials, to senior leaders. This is especially the case for the views of former U.S. analysts, officials, and military officers or others who have access to senior decision-makers or are regarded by such decision-makers as influential and reliable sources of information. And of course, decision-makers themselves can and do at times ignore the government's internal threat assessments and are heavily influenced by nonauthoritative sources.

Authoritative U.S. sources correctly point to the Chinese leadership as having established the goal of building the PLA into a "world-class military" by the end of 2049,

as part of its intention to rejuvenate the PRC into a “great, modern socialist country.” And in 2020, a new milestone was added, involving the 2027 goal (for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PLA) of “building a mechanized, informationized and smart military, and strengthening training and readiness” and “enhancing strategic capacity to safeguard China's sovereignty, security and development interests.”<sup>52</sup>

While impressive on paper, Beijing has yet to define in any detail what achieving these development goals specifically requires in terms of the size, concrete qualitative and quantitative capabilities, and missions of such a military. Hence, Western analysis of such factors must rely primarily on assessments of the nature and likely future direction of China's military modernization programs and general PRC statements about China's military goals.

The most authoritative source on the development of Chinese military capabilities and defense views since 2000 is contained in the annual Defense Department report on China's military weapons systems, capabilities, and doctrines.<sup>53</sup> This document, produced in response to a congressional mandate, is vetted through the U.S. intelligence apparatus and usually attempts to strike a fact-based, balanced assessment of the PLA. The public report obviously does not contain classified information but in general presents a set of assessments that presumably accord with the classified record.

A close study of these reports indicates that Washington's attention has routinely focused on a wide range of PLA weapons systems and capabilities and various economic and technological support systems relating to military modernization. These primarily include:

- Naval ship programs
- Aircraft programs

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<sup>52</sup> Xinhua staff. “China to accelerate modernization of national defense, armed forces.” Xinhua, November 3, 2020. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/03/c\\_139488596.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/03/c_139488596.htm).

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021.” <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

- Missile capabilities
- The ability to project and maintain force beyond Chinese soil and waters
- The sophistication of China’s defense industry
- Defense-related economic espionage and theft
- The ability to conduct joint, coordinated military operations in high-tech conditions
- Anti-satellite and other military-related space capabilities

In evaluating these capabilities over time, the DoD is mainly concerned with (1) the U.S. and PRC balance of power vis-à-vis Taiwan, (2) the PLA’s status as a “modern force” capable of carrying out high-intensity, quick-paced wars, (3) Chinese overseas force projection capabilities, (4) the military technological gap between the U.S. and China, and (5) incentives for China to project force abroad.<sup>54</sup>

The DoD reports have tracked Chinese improvements in all these areas, usually avoiding alarmist speculations about specific weapons systems and platforms. Most notably, in recent years, DoD reports have factually highlighted significant near-peer level PLA advances in five specific realms: shipbuilding, electronic warfare, ballistic and cruise missiles, cyber capabilities, and integrated air defense systems. Many of these efforts are correctly assessed as having advanced significantly in the past 20 years and being directed toward negating U.S. military superiority along China’s maritime periphery, especially regarding a potential conflict over Taiwan.<sup>55</sup>

Other military improvements identified in DoD reports are viewed as enhancing China’s power projection capabilities along the entire first island chain and beyond, especially in

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<sup>54</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2021”; U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020.” <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>; Office of the Director of National Intelligence. “2021 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community.” <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2021/item/2204-2021-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community>.

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2021”; U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2020.”

the naval and missile realms. Such capabilities are viewed as potentially challenging America's long-standing naval predominance, certainly in the Western Pacific, but even possibly beyond East Asia.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, regarding PLA abilities beyond the first island chain, there is no question that China will acquire the capability to conduct increasingly ambitious SLOC (sea lines of communication), NEO (noncombatant evacuation operation), peacekeeping, and other various missions in future decades, in support of China's political and diplomatic objectives far from home. DoD reports and other sources point out that Chinese military strategy has transitioned from almost exclusively stressing "offshore defense" and Taiwan counter-intervention operations to a combined offshore defense and "open seas" protection mission, in order to "manage the seas and oceans and protect maritime rights and interests, safeguard national sovereignty, protect strategic SLOCs, and participate in international maritime cooperation."<sup>57</sup>

Overall, the PLA's growing capacity will likely give Beijing the ability, if not the intention, to challenge the near-total freedom of action that the U.S. navy has enjoyed for many decades in the Western Pacific, and possibly, over the long term, in nearby oceans.

Such developments are understandably of concern to American (and many allied) leaders, especially those who believe that only a clear and overwhelming level of U.S. military predominance extending up to China's territorial boundaries can preserve regional and global peace and prosperity (more on this point below). But judging just how alarmed the U.S. should be and regarding what specific types of threats, to what specific interests require accurate, balanced assessments of Chinese capabilities and intentions based on reliable data, clear distinctions between what is known and not

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<sup>56</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. "Military and Security Developments 2021"; U.S. Department of Defense. "Military and Security Developments 2020"; U.S. Department of Defense. "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019." [https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Xinhua staff. "China's National Defense in the New Era." Xinhua, July 24, 2019.

<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/whitepaperonnationaldefenseinnewera.doc>; Swaine, Michael D. "The PLA Navy's Strategic Transformation to the 'Far Seas': How Far, How Threatening, and What's to be Done." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/07/pla-navy-s-strategic-transformation-to-far-seas-how-far-how-threatening-and-what-s-to-be-done-pub-80588>.

known, and a realistic appreciation of U.S. capabilities and interests, both now and over time.<sup>58</sup>

While balanced in many ways, various DoD reports and other authoritative U.S. sources have also at times engaged in considerably misleading language when describing or implying the importance or uniquely threatening nature of particular PLA actions or weapons systems. One major example is the assertion made in the 2020 DoD report that the Chinese have “the largest navy in the world,” which some readers could take to mean that the PLA Navy is ahead of the U.S. Navy.<sup>59</sup> In fact, while the Chinese navy has a slightly larger number of ships than the U.S., the U.S. has a much higher tonnage of warships, centered on many larger and more sophisticated platforms, including a much larger number of superior aircraft carriers and submarines.<sup>60</sup>

*The PLA’s growing capacity will likely give Beijing the ability, if not the intention, to challenge the near-total freedom of action that the U.S. navy has enjoyed for many decades in the Western Pacific.*

Another statement from a DoD report that requires careful parsing is that “[t]he PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is rapidly catching up to Western air forces.”<sup>61</sup> While this is undoubtedly true in terms of some areas of advanced technology and equipment, it is questionable that the Chinese air force is appreciably closing the gap in terms of pilot skills and experience. Overall, the Chinese continue to face major issues with aircraft maintenance, training, and mental health. And the PLAAF conscription system limits the use of exercises and the accumulation of experience.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Swaine. “The PLA Navy’s Strategic Transformation to the ‘Far Seas.’”

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2020.”

<sup>60</sup> Roblin, Sebastien. “Is China’s Navy Really Bigger than the U.S. Navy? Here’s the Math.” *19FortyFive*. July 16, 2021. <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2021/07/is-chinas-navy-really-bigger-than-the-u-s-navy-here-is-the-math/>.

<sup>61</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2021.”

<sup>62</sup> Allen, Kenneth, and Garafola, Cristina L. *70 Years of the PLA Air Force*. Montgomery, Ala. China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2564684/70-years-of-the-peoples-liberation-army-air-force/>.



Even more inflated characterizations of Chinese military capabilities found in DoD reports refer, for example, to “staggering amounts of new military hardware.”<sup>63</sup> No attempt is made, however, to clearly justify such language. In fact, while the Chinese have added many numbers and new types of weapons systems over the past 10 to 15 years, it is debatable whether these new capabilities are “staggering” in nature, which is usually defined as overwhelming, especially for the United States.

This kind of inflated language found in authoritative reports is also reflected in vague, hyperbolic statements by senior U.S. officials. For example, in March 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made this sweeping assessment:

We see [military threats from other countries] in China’s efforts to threaten freedom of navigation, to militarize the South China Sea, to target countries throughout the Indo–Pacific with increasingly sophisticated military capabilities. Beijing’s military ambitions are growing by the year.<sup>64</sup>

Each of these broad descriptions of Chinese military capabilities and their application is hyperbolic and likely designed to alarm. Beijing’s supposed threats to freedom of navigation are limited to portions of disputed seas near China, are relevant only during wartime, and in peacetime involve differences between the legal stances regarding the maritime transit rights of warships asserted by China and several other coastal nations, and those positions taken by the U.S. and other nations.<sup>65</sup>

China’s militarization of the South China Sea involves the creation of air and naval defense facilities on several recently formed artificial islands in the Spratly Islands group and increases in the number of Chinese coast guard, naval, and maritime militia vessels operating across a vast area. This has been undertaken to protect China’s

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<sup>63</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. *Military and Security Developments 2020*.

<sup>64</sup> Blinken, Antony J. “Reaffirming and Reimagining America’s Alliances.” Speech, Brussels, Belgium, March 24, 2021. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reaffirming-and-reimagining-americas-alliances/>.

<sup>65</sup> Odell, Rachel Esplin. “Promoting Peace and Stability in the Maritime Order Amid China’s Rise.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2021. <https://quincystat.org/report/promoting-peace-and-stability-in-the-maritime-order-amid-chinas-rise/>; Herscovitch, Benjamin. “A Balanced Threat Assessment of China’s South China Sea Policy.” Cato Institute, August 28, 2017. <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/balanced-threat-assessment-chinas-south-china-sea-policy>; Odell, Rachel Esplin. “Mare interpretatum: continuity and evolution in States’ Interpretations of the Law of the Sea.” Ph.D. dissertation. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/130597>.

SLOCs and the approaches to China’s sensitive nuclear submarine base on Hainan Island, and to support China’s disputed claims in the area, albeit sometimes in excessive and repressive ways.<sup>66</sup> The reference to the Chinese supposedly “targeting” countries “throughout the Indo–Pacific” implies an aggressive intent that remains unclear. It is true that Beijing has increasingly deployed weapons systems (primarily missile and naval) in the region that could reach nearby countries. But the U.S. has also possessed the capability to “target” the entire region for many years. Should the same aggressive intent be implied in the case of the U.S. on the basis of such a fact?

Perhaps one of the most sweeping, inflated USG assessments of the military threat posed by China occurred in March 2022. In a statement for the Senate Armed Services Committee, the commander of the United States Strategic Command said:

*Today, both the PRC and Russia have the capability to unilaterally escalate a conflict to any level of violence, in any domain, worldwide, with any instrument of national power, and at any time.*<sup>67</sup> (emphasis in the original)

Although China certainly has for many years possessed the capability to strike virtually any location on the planet with nuclear weapons, and can employ cyber capabilities worldwide, it absolutely does not have anything close to the sweeping global conventional capabilities indicated by this remark.

Perhaps of equal importance, while DoD reports and other USG documents and statements do at times indicate that China’s military advances of relevance beyond the first island chain remain modest and do mention some of the PLA’s shortcomings, they often fail to assess in a comprehensive manner those limitations the PLA would need to overcome in order to truly challenge America’s overall military superiority and pose a major threat to U.S. military power, or even to mount a successful attempt to seize and hold Taiwan.

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<sup>66</sup> Vivona, Alex. “Water Wars: No One in the Mood for Compromise in the South China Sea.” *Lawfare*. July 7, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/water-wars-no-one-mood-compromise-south-china-sea>; Panda, Ankit. “The US Navy’s First Trump-era South China Sea FONOP Just Happened: Takeaways and Analysis.” *The Diplomat*. May 25, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/the-trump-administrations-first-south-china-sea-fonop-is-here-first-takeaways-and-analysis/>.

<sup>67</sup> Richard, Adm. Charles. Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 1, 2022. <https://www.stratcom.mil/Portals/8/Documents/2022%20USSTRATCOM%20Posture%20Statement.pdf>.

Such limits in PLA capabilities also cover these dozen areas:<sup>68</sup>

- Relatively few and in many cases lower-quality nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), high-end air defense cruisers and destroyers, oceangoing amphibious platform docks and flat deck landing helicopter assault ships, and landing ship transports and medium landing craft, with crews far less experienced than those in similar United States platforms.<sup>69</sup>
- No significant kinetic power projection capabilities that extend beyond land-based air and missile ranges, reflected in a considerable insufficiency of airlift and in-flight air-refueling capacity, and long-endurance and experienced nuclear-powered carriers and submarines.<sup>70</sup>
- A much smaller number of aircraft carriers, nuclear weapons, fifth-generation combat aircraft with advanced electronics, and overseas military and logistics bases, compared with the U.S. military.<sup>71</sup>
- A growing dependence on space-based military support assets (including for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, navigation and positioning, and communications), thus duplicating the U.S. space dependency trap.<sup>72</sup>
- Confusing dual commander/political officer structures at the tactical and operational levels (where decisions have to be made in the heat of battle), and a

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<sup>68</sup> This list is derived from detailed discussions with several PLA specialists in and out of the U.S. government and several written open-source assessments by well-established and highly regarded PLA scholars.

<sup>69</sup> McDevitt, Michael A., USN (ret.). "DOD's Role in Competing with China." Testimony before the House Committee on Armed Services, January 15, 2020.

<https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110390/witnesses/HMTG-116-AS00-Wstate-McDevittM-20200115.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> Sawant, Mangesh. "Why China Cannot Challenge the US Military Primacy." *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Air University Press, December 2021.

<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2870650/why-china-cannot-challenge-the-us-military-primacy/>; Heginbotham,

Eric, et al. "The U.S.–China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017." The Rand Corp., 2015. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR392.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html); Blasko, Dennis. "PLA Weaknesses and Xi's Concerns about PLA Capabilities." Testimony before the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 7, 2019.

[https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Blasko\\_USCC%20Testimony\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Blasko_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>71</sup> McDevitt. "DOD's Role in Competing with China"; Also see Vine, David, Patterson Deppen, and Leah Bolger. "the 750 U.S. military bases abroad ... comprise more than three times the number of overseas bases held by all other militaries combined." "Drawdown: Improving U.S. and Global Security Through Military Base Closures Abroad." Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2021. <https://quincyinst.org/report/drawdown-improving-u-s-and-global-security-through-military-base-closures-abroad/>.

<sup>72</sup> Chase, Michael S., et al. "China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)." The Rand Corp., 2015. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR893.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR893.html).

continued inability to provide fully trained and educated officers capable of performing the tasks required by advanced joint operations.<sup>73</sup>

- New and untested commanders and staffs at battalion and joint theater levels, resulting in difficulties integrating new kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities; moreover, correcting this deficiency will require considerable time, since “nurturing qualified commanders and staff officers is a long-term process involving education, training, and experience gained through assignments at different organizational levels.”<sup>74</sup>
- No practical experience in joint operations under combat conditions and continued, severe limits in close air support, air assault, and long-range, sea-based air defense.<sup>75</sup>
- Excessive centralization and a reluctance to delegate authority; this is a historical feature of authoritarian systems and has been evident in the CCP and PLA decision-making structures for many years; “the PLA’s organizational culture does not encourage independent decision-making and taking responsibility, which suggests that greater centralization [under Xi Jinping] may slow down decision-making.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Chase. “China’s Incomplete Military Transformation”; Blasko. “PLA Weaknesses and Xi’s Concerns”

<sup>74</sup> Blasko, Dennis. “Ten Reasons Why China Will Have Trouble Fighting a Modern War.” *War on the Rocks*, February 18, 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/02/ten-reasons-why-china-will-have-trouble-fighting-a-modern-war/>.

<sup>75</sup> Wuthnow, Joel, et al. “none of [the PLA’s] overseas operations and few of its overseas exercises have been ‘joint.’” “PLA Overseas Operations in 2035: Inching Toward a Global Combat Capability.” National Defense University, 2021.

<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-309.pdf>; Solen, Derek. “[E]ven if the PLA has the elements of a complex of systems and procedures for CAS (close air support), its capability for CAS is far from mature.” “The Improvement of the PLA’s Close Air Support Capability.” China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020.

<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2450158/the-improvement-of-the-plas-close-air-support-capability/#:~:text=In%20August%202020%20the%20Chinese,for%20more%20than%20a%20decade>; Fox, Maj. Tom. Despite the rapid fielding of new helicopters of different types, “baseline proficiency for pilots and units will take time to achieve, putting operational capability even further down the road.” “[T]he PLAA is at best a decade away from being able to mount a large-scale assault on Taiwan.” “China Maritime Report No. 17: The PLA Army’s New Helicopters: An ‘Easy Button’ for Crossing the Taiwan Strait?” (2021). CMSI China Maritime Reports. 17. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/17/>; McDevitt, Michael. *China as a Twenty-first Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*. Annapolis, Md. Naval Institute Press, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Saunders, Philip, et al. “Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms.” National Defense University, 2019. <https://permanent.access.gpo.gov/gpo117758/Chairman-Xi.pdf>; Chien-wen Kou. “Xi Jinping in Command: Solving the Principal-Agent Problem in CCP–PLA Relations?” *The China Quarterly* 232, 2017. 866–85. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741017001321>.

- Highly vulnerable sea lanes and many obstacles to the PLAN achieving a clear ability to defend them in the future; “Only with a very large navy would it be possible to execute the sea-lane protection mission.”<sup>77</sup>
- Continued problems with anti-submarine warfare, or ASW, capabilities; while improved, these capabilities remain well below what is needed, and include significant trouble dealing with quiet U.S. SSNs.<sup>78</sup>
- A military with an overwhelming majority of soldiers being the only child in families, along with other conditions that reportedly in some cases create low morale within parts of the PLA and arguably reduce the amount and quality of recruits.<sup>79</sup>
- The continued inability of PLA professional military education and training systems to deliver sufficient numbers of junior and mid-level officers; “PLA military education has only slowly moved itself toward reforms that could eventually produce enough officers with [a high-tech] background”; “the current training and cultivation system does not lend itself to creating a joint force”; one PLA specialist asserted in 2017 that recruitment policies were “still at a basic stage after nearly 20 years.”<sup>80</sup>

One extremely knowledgeable and experienced former U.S. military analyst of PLA capabilities cited above concluded in 2019 congressional testimony that in many battlefield functions aside from those few truly sophisticated ones mentioned here (such as shipbuilding), “the PLA trails advanced militaries by one to multiple decades of experience.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> McDevitt. *China as a Twenty-first Century Naval Power*.

<sup>78</sup> Chase, Michael S. et al. “China’s Incomplete Military Transformation.” The Rand Corp., 2015. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR800/RR893/RAND\\_RR893.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR800/RR893/RAND_RR893.pdf); McDevitt. *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power*.

<sup>79</sup> Kosaka, Tetsuro. “China’s military has an Achilles’ heel: Low troop morale.” Nikkei Asia, September 19, 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-military-has-an-Achilles-heel-Low-troop-morale>; Horta, Loro. “China’s Military Modernisation: Constrained by One-Child Policy.” RSIS, September 1, 2021. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/chinas-military-modernisation-constrained-by-one-child-policy/#.YiTjgejMK3B>.

<sup>80</sup> Kamphausen, Roy. “The People of the PLA 2.0.” Army War College, 2021. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/944/>.

<sup>81</sup> Blasko. “PLA Weaknesses and Xi’s Concerns.”

This greatly calls into question the assertion found in the September 2020 “Future of Defense Task Force Report” of the House Armed Services Committee that:

There is consensus among national security experts that China is increasing its ability to compete so rapidly that it could overtake the United States in military capability in as few as five years.<sup>82</sup>

The PLA is certainly working to address many of its weaknesses. However, bureaucratic interests, organizational culture, and demands on resources in other areas, among other factors, are all likely to continue to greatly slow e this process and demand ongoing attention. Indeed, the Chinese timetable goal of the year 2049 for becoming a world-class military in all respects is by no means rapid. As the above-quoted former USG PLA analyst stated to the author in a private message:

[The Chinese] have understood it will be a generational process of reform, not a rapid modernization process. ... They are getting plenty of new equipment, but in many cases it is arriving faster than they can train crews to man, operate, and sustain it and staffs to plan for and control it.

In addition, the above-cited recently published study of changes in Chinese military strategy concludes that the PLA’s continued focus “on ‘informatization,’ with ‘intelligentization’ framed as an emerging phenomenon, [suggests that] the PLA should achieve modernization incrementally ... there is still much to do.”<sup>83</sup>

On the nuclear level, Beijing is improving the quality and has expanded the size and diversity of its nuclear arsenal. Nonetheless, it remains vastly inferior to America’s

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<sup>82</sup> The only source cited as evidence for this assertion is an article appearing in *The Atlantic* magazine entitled “How the US could lose a war with China.” See House Armed Services Committee. “Future of Defense Task Force Report 2020.” [https://armedservices.house.gov/\\_cache/files/2/6/26129500-d208-47ba-a9f7-25a8f82828b0/6D5C75605DE8DDF0013712923B4388D7\\_future-of-defense-task-force-report.pdf](https://armedservices.house.gov/_cache/files/2/6/26129500-d208-47ba-a9f7-25a8f82828b0/6D5C75605DE8DDF0013712923B4388D7_future-of-defense-task-force-report.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> Wuthnow, Joel, and M. Taylor Fravel. “China’s Military Strategy for a ‘New Era’: Some Change, More Continuity, and Tantalizing Hints.” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, January 2022. 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2022.2043850>.



nuclear force in both size and sophistication and is almost certainly still tied to a retaliatory, second-strike, strategic mission.<sup>84</sup>

There is little if any evidence that China has transitioned to a first-strike, warfighting nuclear posture and strategy. Beijing's recent improvements of its strategic nuclear forces are almost certainly intended primarily to increase the survivability of its second-strike force in the face of significant improvements in U.S. offensive nuclear capabilities, ballistic missile defense, and conventional precision-guided munitions.<sup>85</sup>

The Chinese might also be expanding their nuclear arsenal in response to an increased fear that Washington would employ nuclear threats or use tactical nuclear weapons in a future Taiwan conflict.<sup>86</sup>

*There is no credible evidence to indicate that Beijing is planning to threaten or employ tactical nuclear weapons in a crisis or has adopted a doctrine that calls for their use.*

Despite these calculations, the buildup of China's nuclear arsenal gives it the material capacity to implement a more offensive nuclear stance in the future that it has never possessed. Although U.S. policy documents do not argue that such a change has occurred, Washington should develop a concerted strategy to disincentivize China from adopting such a strategic stance, as discussed in the next section.

Beyond this, it is possible that Beijing is also seeking to increase the rungs on its nuclear escalation ladder in a conflict by acquiring the capacity to respond on the sub-strategic level to a possible tactical nuclear attack in a conventional conflict. The relatively large yield of its tactical nuclear weapons poses real concerns regarding the escalatory potential of their use in a primarily conventional conflict. Specifically, using

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<sup>84</sup> Gomez, Eric. "Limiting Nuclear Dangers." "Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia." Quincy Institute, March 11, 2022; Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. "Nuclear Notebook: Nuclear Arsenals of the World." 2021. <https://thebulletin.org/nuclear-notebook/>. The *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* estimates that China has around 350 nuclear warheads. By contrast, estimates for the U.S. nuclear arsenal stand at around 3,800 nuclear warheads, approximately 1,750 in a deployed stance.

<sup>85</sup> Gomez. "Limiting Nuclear Dangers."

<sup>86</sup> Gale, Alastair. "China Is Accelerating Its Nuclear Buildup Over Rising Fears of U.S. Conflict." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 9, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-accelerating-its-nuclear-buildup-over-rising-fears-of-u-s-conflict-11649509201>.

fairly high-yield weapons makes it harder to signal that nuclear use is in fact limited. Low-yield nukes and escalation ladders are supposed to send a message of “this far and no further or else.” That is harder to do unless you have really low-yield weapons. Nonetheless, there is no credible evidence to indicate that Beijing is planning to threaten or employ tactical nuclear weapons in a crisis or has adopted a doctrine that calls for their use.<sup>87</sup>



Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy's guided-missile frigate Yueyang takes part in a China-Thailand joint naval exercise in waters off the southern port city of Shanwei, Guangdong province, China May 6, 2019. REUTERS/Stringer

From all the above, it is clear that the Chinese military is not an overall “pacing threat” to the U.S. military regarding many if not most capabilities, as U.S. military leaders often

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<sup>87</sup> Gomez. “Limiting Nuclear Dangers”; Korda, Matt, and Hans Christensen. “China Is Building A Second Nuclear Missile Silo Field.” Federation of American Scientists. July 26, 2021. <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2021/07/china-is-building-a-second-nuclear-missile-silo-field/>; Radzinsky, Brian. “The Strategic Implications of the Evolving US–China Nuclear Balance.” *Washington Quarterly*. February 2, 2022. [https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/1/2181/files/2019/03/Radzinsky\\_TWQ\\_44-4.pdf](https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/1/2181/files/2019/03/Radzinsky_TWQ_44-4.pdf); Stokes, Jacob. “China’s Nuclear Buildup is About More than Nukes.” *Just Security*. January 4, 2022. <https://www.justsecurity.org/79622/chinas-nuclear-buildup-is-about-more-than-nukes/>.

state,<sup>88</sup> and is moving to close the gaps in many areas only in incremental, sporadic, and incomplete ways, at least regarding its global capabilities. Indeed, in several areas, the PLA faces deep-seated obstacles to achieving a level of overall military prowess that can rival the U.S. The only well-grounded caveat to this assessment concerns relative Chinese capabilities in the Western Pacific (and especially along the first island chain), where Beijing has achieved at least a rough parity, and possibly even a distinct advantage in the number of some naval and air platforms, compared with U.S. (and Japanese) forces.<sup>89</sup> But U.S. officials rarely if ever make such a distinction when describing the PLA as a “pacing threat.” They simply imply that China’s overall military capabilities are keeping up with (or surpassing) those of the U.S. worldwide.

As one might expect, in looking beyond the U.S. government sources cited here, one can find many nonauthoritative sources that present even higher levels of threat inflation regarding Chinese military capabilities and their future trajectories.

This is not true across the board. Some nonauthoritative sources are balanced and moderate in describing current and likely future PLA capabilities, especially in comparison with overall U.S. military power. For example, a 2020 report by several scholars of the Chinese military provides a picture of a PLA that has clearly advanced significantly in many areas but is not a current “peer” competitor, much less a “world-class military.” The report states:

A long-term, multi-decade, multi-generational, and complex process is needed to overcome a wide range of operational problems that the PLA itself recognizes. ... [T]he PLA, by its own assessment, has not yet reached the level of an “advanced military” relative to the capabilities of the United States, Russia and several countries allied with the United States.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Marquardt, Alex, and Oren Liebermann. “Senior US general warns China’s military progress is ‘stunning’ as US is hampered by ‘brutal’ bureaucracy.” CNN, October 28, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/28/politics/hyten-stunning-china-military-progress/index.html>; Shelbourne, Mallory. “SECDEF Nominee Austin Affirms Threat From China, Will ‘Update’ National Defense Strategy.” USNI News, January 19, 2021. <https://news.usni.org/2021/01/19/secdef-nominee-austin-affirms-threat-from-china-will-update-national-defense-strategy>.

<sup>89</sup> See next section for an assessment of Chinese and U.S. force comparisons.

<sup>90</sup> Gill, Bates, Adam Ni, and Dennis Blasko. “The ambitious reform plans of the People’s Liberation Army: Progress, prospects and implications for Australia.” *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 2 (1), 2020: 5–26. <http://www.defence.gov.au/ADC/publications/AJDSS/volume2-number1/ambitious-reform-plans-of-the-PLA.asp>.

While cautioning about China moving toward a “tipping point” in some capabilities relevant to the military balance over Taiwan and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, a 2015 Rand assessment of the PLA also does not cast it as a peer competitor or even a near-peer competitor overall. It states: “By many standards, the Chinese military continues to lag far behind that of the United States.”<sup>91</sup>

Unfortunately, such balanced assessments are the exception among nonauthoritative sources. The number of highly inflated threat assessments of current and future PLA capabilities are numerous, and more appear almost daily. Hair-raising references are made to China’s “massive” and “breakneck” military modernization efforts, fueled by “explosive” defense spending.<sup>92</sup>

But Chinese defense spending has remained at or below 2 percent of GDP since at least 2000, well below what the U.S. spends, in both absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP. PRC defense spending is largely pegged to the growth of the Chinese economy and, while increasing significantly in absolute terms as China has grown, it has not exploded, recently or in the past. It is far from “breakneck” in nature, and Beijing has the likely capacity to increase its rate of defense spending significantly.<sup>93</sup>

In any event, as a result of such supposedly “breakneck” modernization, one other source asserts that “China’s ability to conduct power projection and amphibious operations *around the world* will become a fundamental fact of politics *in the near future*.”<sup>94</sup> (emphasis added.)

Apparently, the “near future” referenced in this report is 2030. And while Beijing is acquiring the capability to mount amphibious operations at some distance using a few

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<sup>91</sup> Heginbotham, et. al. “The U.S.–China Military Scorecard”; Also see Heginbotham, Eric, et al. “Chinese Threats to U.S. Surface Ships: An Assessment of Relative Capabilities, 1996–2017.” The Rand Corp., 2015. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9858z4.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9858z4.html).

<sup>92</sup> Bowman, Bradley, et al. “Don’t Assume the US will fight China and Russia One at a Time.” *Defense One*. October 28, 2021. <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/10/dont-assume-us-will-fight-china-and-russia-one-time/186453/>; Mastro, Oriana Skylar, and Ely Ratner. “China is Gaining on the United States. What Are We Doing About It?” *Politico*, February 9, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/09/china-united-states-donald-trump-216955>.

<sup>93</sup> “What Does China Really Spend on its Military?” CSIS China Power Project. <https://chinapower.csis.org/military-spending/>.

<sup>94</sup> Cronin, Patrick M., et al. “Beyond the San Hai: The Challenge of China’s Blue-Water Navy.” Center for a New American Security, May 2017. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/beyond-the-san-hai>; Also see Metz, Steven. “How to Know When China is Pulling Even with the United States.” *World Politics Review*, March 2, 2018. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24282/how-to-know-when-china-is-pulling-even-with-the-united-states>.

thousand marines, it has nothing close to the ability to conduct sophisticated or sizable amphibious operations “around the world.” This source fails to make this distinction, leaving the impression that Beijing will supposedly achieve some large level of capability in eight years “if trends continue.”<sup>95</sup> According to one former high-level U.S. intelligence analyst of the PLA, Beijing’s amphibious capabilities with regard even to Taiwan have stalled in recent years.<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps most troubling, the above types of inflated or misleading language and assessments of current and future PLA capabilities have led both authoritative and nonauthoritative U.S. sources to specifically assert or strongly imply that China’s military capabilities pose an existential or near-existential threat to the United States and other democratic countries. For example, a former U.S. admiral in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee stated:

The greatest danger *to the future of the United States* continues to be an erosion of conventional deterrence. Without a valid and convincing conventional deterrent, China is emboldened to take action in the region and globally to supplant U.S. interests. As the Indo–Pacific’s military balance becomes more unfavorable, the U.S. accumulates additional risk that may embolden adversaries [read China] to unilaterally attempt to change the status quo.”<sup>97</sup> (emphasis added)

And a September 2020 report of the House Armed Services Committee stated:

The national security challenges the United States faces today [including China] are *existential*, and they cannot be met by simply doubling down on old models of policy and investment.<sup>98</sup> (emphasis added)

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<sup>95</sup> Cronin, *et al.* “Beyond the San Hai.”

<sup>96</sup> Private Correspondence. Also see Blasko, Dennis J., “China Maritime Report No. 20: The PLA Army Amphibious Force.” CMSI China Maritime Reports, 2022. 20. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/20>; And Dahm, J. Michael, “China Maritime Report No. 16: Chinese Ferry Tales: The PLA’s Use of Civilian Shipping in Support of Over-the-Shore Logistics.” CMSI China Maritime Reports, 2021. 16. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/16>.

<sup>97</sup> Davidson, Philip S., Adm. “Statement of Admiral Philip S. Davidson, U.S. Navy Commander, U.S. Indo–Pacific Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Indo–Pacific Command Posture.” Senate Armed Services Committee, March 9, 2021. [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson\\_03-09-21.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson_03-09-21.pdf).

<sup>98</sup> House Armed Services Committee. “Future of Defense Task Force Report 2020.” [https://armedservices.house.gov/\\_cache/files/2/6/26129500-d208-47ba-a9f7-25a8f82828b0/6D5C75605DE8DDF0013712923B4388D7\\_future-of-defense-task-force-report.pdf](https://armedservices.house.gov/_cache/files/2/6/26129500-d208-47ba-a9f7-25a8f82828b0/6D5C75605DE8DDF0013712923B4388D7_future-of-defense-task-force-report.pdf).



In addition, U.S. leaders such as Mitt Romney and Mike Pompeo have explicitly referred to China as an existential threat.<sup>99</sup>

And one Rand analyst has asserted that China's pursuit of world-class military capabilities would "represent perhaps the most destabilizing geostrategic development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century," potentially pitting the U.S. against "a militarily superior adversary."<sup>100</sup>

If that is not alarming enough, one congressionally mandated body asserted recently:

China's leadership is increasingly uninterested in compromise and willing to engage in destabilizing and aggressive actions in its efforts to insulate itself from perceived threats or to press perceived advantages. ... [We] *will continue to see the slow but certain erosion of the security, sovereignty, and identity of democratic nations.*<sup>101</sup> (emphasis added)

In fact, there is no evidence to support the notion of China as an existential threat, military or otherwise. Literally, an existential threat means a threat to the physical existence of the nation through the possession of an ability and intent to exterminate the U.S. population, presumably via the use of highly lethal nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. A less-conventional understanding of the term posits the radical erosion or ending of U.S. prosperity and freedoms through economic, political, ideational, and military pressure, thereby in essence destroying the basis for the American way of life. Any threats that fall below these two definitions do not convey what is meant by the word "existential."<sup>102</sup>

In reality, as a military power, China has no capability to threaten the existence of the United States except possibly via a nuclear attack. Yet any such attack would be suicidal, given America's far larger nuclear arsenal and China's inability to conduct a

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<sup>99</sup> Romney, Mitt. "We can't look away from China's existential threat," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2021. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/mitt-romney-china-threat/2021/05/12/9651dcf2-b271-11eb-9059-d8176b9e3798\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/mitt-romney-china-threat/2021/05/12/9651dcf2-b271-11eb-9059-d8176b9e3798_story.html); Rutz, David. "Chinese Communist Party an 'existential' threat that Biden must confront: Pompeo." Fox News, January 19, 2021. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/chinese-communist-party-existential-threat-biden-confront-pompeo>.

<sup>100</sup> Grossman, Derek. "Envisioning a World-Class PLA: Implications for the United States and the Indo-Pacific." Testimony before USCC, June 20, 2019. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1084774.pdf>.

<sup>101</sup> U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission. "Report to Congress." U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2021. [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021\\_Annual\\_Report\\_to\\_Congress.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021_Annual_Report_to_Congress.pdf).

<sup>102</sup> Swaine, Michael. "China Doesn't Pose an Existential Threat for America." *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/21/china-existential-threat-america/>.



disarming nuclear strike. Unfortunately, this hasn't stopped some observers from creating undue alarm over China's nuclear capabilities by speculating that Beijing desires to sprint to nuclear parity with the U.S. and Russia, or even exceed their capabilities.

*As a military power, China has no capability to threaten the existence of the United States except possibly via a nuclear attack.*

For example, when asked by a member of Congress if it were the case that were China to triple or quadruple its nuclear stockpile over the next decade, Beijing “could possibly have *nuclear overmatch* against the United States before the end of this decade” (emphasis added), Adm. Philip Davidson, the U.S. Indo–Pacific commander at the time, agreed, while labeling China as “the greatest long-term strategic threat to security in the 21st century.”<sup>103</sup> Instead, while Beijing is clearly increasing its nuclear capabilities—most likely in response to increases in the quality and survivability of the U.S. nuclear arsenal—there is no concrete evidence to indicate that China seeks to create a huge nuclear arsenal larger than that of the United States.<sup>104</sup>

In looking beyond PLA capabilities alone to assessments of Chinese military intentions, objectives, and strategy, one finds equally if not greater examples of threat inflation. In fact, this topic is probably the most prone to inflation.

Among authoritative sources, beginning in 2015, the annual DoD reports on the PLA began asserting that Beijing intends to “reacquire regional preeminence” (undefined) in the Asia-Pacific, and especially maritime superiority within the first island chain.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Isaacs, John. “China is Not the New Soviet Union.” Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation, April 8, 2021. <https://armscontrolcenter.org/china-is-not-the-new-soviet-union/>.

<sup>104</sup> Gomez. “Limiting Nuclear Dangers.” 194–195; Bugos, Shannon. “Pentagon Sees Faster Chinese Nuclear Expansion.” *Arms Control*, December 2021. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-12/news/pentagon-sees-faster-chinese-nuclear-expansion>.

<sup>105</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2015.” [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2015\\_China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2015_China_Military_Power_Report.pdf); U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2021.”

By 2018, under the Trump administration, this assessment of Chinese goals was applied to the entire globe and placed in a highly alarming context by the National Defense Strategy issued in that year. It stated:

China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo–Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo–Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.<sup>106</sup>

The uses of the words “preeminence” and “hegemony” in this and other more recent, official U.S. defense documents<sup>107</sup> clearly convey the belief that China is deliberately seeking to establish regional and global military and other forms of superiority over all other nations. In many instances, among both authoritative and nonauthoritative U.S. sources, this supposed Chinese drive for preeminence is placed in the context of a titanic global contest between Chinese and Russian authoritarianism and democracies for control of the so-called global or liberal international order.

For example, the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act asserts:

Two years ago, the National Defense Strategy (NDS) outlined our nation’s preeminent challenge: strategic competition with authoritarian adversaries that stand firmly against our shared American values of freedom, democracy, and peace – namely, China and Russia. These adversaries seek to shift the global order in their favor, at our expense. In pursuit of this goal, these nations have increased military and economic aggression, worked to develop advanced

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<sup>106</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America.” <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>107</sup> See, for example, the “2021 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” where Beijing was described as seeking to “secure what it views as its territory and regional preeminence, and pursue international cooperation at Washington’s expense.”.

technologies, expanded their influence around the world, and undermined our own influence.<sup>108</sup>

This view is frequently echoed by senior U.S. diplomatic and military officials.<sup>109</sup>

In reality, whether there is a single “global order” keyed to the interests and values of the United States, and whether both Russia and China are committed to overturning this entire order as a vital necessity are highly debatable propositions.<sup>110</sup> But putting that issue aside, there is little if any hard evidence to confirm that China has set the goal of replacing the United States as the dominant global superpower (and in the process replacing all major global norms) as a vital necessity. It is not even clear that Beijing seeks regional preeminence, as opposed to some form of parity with the United States and Japan, at least as measured by numbers of naval and air platforms.

It is worth noting that Chinese leaders routinely state they are not developing their military to achieve such global or regional dominance. Indeed, there is nothing in the authoritative Chinese record to confirm such a goal.<sup>111</sup> Based on authoritative statements, the Chinese identify five major global missions for the PLA:

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<sup>108</sup> U.S. House of Representatives. “H.R.6395 – William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021.” U.S. House of Representatives, January 1, 2021. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6395>; Also see House Armed Services Committee. “Future of Defense Task Force Report 2020.”

<sup>109</sup> “There’s no question that Beijing’s coercive behavior threatens our collective security and prosperity, and that it is actively working to undercut the rules of the international system and the values we and our allies share.” Blinken. “Reaffirming and Reimagining America’s Alliances”; “China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system – all the rules, values, and relationships that make the world work the way we want it to, because it ultimately serves the interests and reflects the values of the American people.” See Blinken. “A Foreign Policy for the American People.” “I worry that they’re accelerating their ambitions to supplant the United States and our leadership role in the rules-based international order, which they’ve long said that they want to do that by 2050. See Shelbourne, Mallory. “Davidson: China Could Try to Take Control of Taiwan In ‘Next Six Years,’” *USNI News*, March 9, 2021. <https://news.usni.org/2021/03/09/davidson-china-could-try-to-take-control-of-taiwan-in-next-six-years>.

<sup>110</sup> Johnston, Alastair Iain. “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations.” *International Security* 2019, 44 (2). 9–60. [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00360](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360); Weiss, Jessica Chen, and Thomas Pepinsky. “The Clash of Systems?” *Foreign Affairs*, June 11, 2021.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-11/clash-systems>; Walt, Stephen. “China Wants a ‘Rules-Based International Order,’ Too.” *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2021.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/>; Brands, Hal, and Zack Coope.

“U.S.–Chinese Rivalry Is a Battle Over Values.” *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2021.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-03-16/us-china-rivalry-battle-over-values>.

<sup>111</sup> Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China. “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” July 24, 2019.

[http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content\\_4846452.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content_4846452.htm); Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China. “China’s Military Strategy.” May 2015. [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2021-06/23/content\\_4887928.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2021-06/23/content_4887928.htm); Xi Jinping.

“Keynote speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021.”

Xinhua, April 20, 2021. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/20/c\\_139893137.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/20/c_139893137.htm); Wang Yi. “Speech by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the French Institute of International Relations.” Xinhua, September 1,

2020. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/01/c\\_139332396.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/01/c_139332396.htm); “Xi Focus: Building a peace-loving world-class military.” Xinhua, August 1, 2021. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-08/01/c\\_1310101198.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-08/01/c_1310101198.htm).

- The defense of China’s sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the Persian Gulf,
- Countering limited maritime security threats such as piracy.
- United Nations-mandated peacekeeping missions.
- Performing humanitarian assistance/disaster relief missions and Noncombatant Evacuation Operations.
- Asserting (in undefined ways) China’s overall influence, status, and image as a major world power.<sup>112</sup>

In addition (and of greater importance), according to a recent, detailed study of China’s military strategy, Beijing continues to face major, deep-seated strategic, structural, and resource constraints in developing a truly globe-spanning military doctrine and posture. Instead, its military strategy remains fixed primarily on Taiwan and other so-called local wars and “is not expected to address more than a single major contingency.”<sup>113</sup>

Of course, the ambiguity of the last bullet point leaves open the possibility that China seeks global military preeminence. But according to many U.S. sources, including the Defense Department, this goal is more than just a possibility. DoD reports have clearly indicated in places that Beijing not only would never accept a position of military inferiority vis-à-vis the United States, but desires to achieve clear preeminence.

And yet, the DoD has also at times seemed to equivocate somewhat regarding this assessment. In the 2021 DoD report, for example, China’s goal of national rejuvenation is linked with an effort to “*match or surpass*” (emphasis added) U.S. global influence and power.” The same report also stated that, despite its desire to create a “world-class military,” the Chinese leadership does not necessarily “aim for the PLA to mirror the U.S. military in terms of capacity, capability, or readiness.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Wuthnow. “China’s Military Strategy for a ‘New Era.’”

<sup>114</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments, 2021.”

Some observers might think that there is no practical difference between China's seeking to match rather than exceed U.S. military capabilities as a vital interest, but this is not the case. Efforts to match a potential foe's capabilities suggests a possible willingness to achieve some type of stable balance or set of understandings in which neither side strives, as a vital national interest, to dominate the other.

In contrast, a drive to achieve predominance as a vital necessity suggests that a nation would not accept a balance or set of mutual restraints or cooperative security system as a way of preserving peace and avoiding expensive and dangerous arms racing. The danger here is that, if one assumes the latter (an implacable drive for preeminence), then there is little point in attempting to achieve the former (balance or restraint-based assurances).

But if there is uncertainty regarding China's ultimate goal and if the U.S. believes it can cause Beijing to forgo its possible maximalist objective through means other than open-ended arms racing and containment, then a strong incentive exists to not assume the worst regarding Chinese intentions, as unfortunately many authoritative and nonauthoritative U.S. sources do. Under such conditions, it would be better to be consistent in stating that China's ultimate goal remains unclear, and to remain genuinely open-minded and test, via credible signals of restraint, Beijing's willingness to accept some type of parity in military power in some important respects, rather than to assume Beijing is implacably committed to preeminence and react accordingly.

But of course, for this to work, Washington must first believe that Sino-U.S. military parity is desirable or acceptable, which is far from the case. Many authoritative and nonauthoritative U.S. sources assert or imply that only continued (or recovered) across-the-board U.S. military superiority will ensure future regional and global peace

and stability. Even the possibility that China could contest U.S. military superiority is seen as a dire threat.<sup>115</sup>

Again, unsurprisingly, the most extreme assessments of Chinese military intentions and goals are found in nonauthoritative sources, including from individuals in or near the U.S. government.

In the nuclear arena, one nonauthoritative but government-related source opines:

The scale of China's nuclear buildup ... suggests it could also be intended to support a new strategy of limited nuclear first use. Such a strategy would enable Chinese leaders to leverage the nuclear forces to accomplish Chinese political objectives beyond survival, such as coercing another state or deterring U.S. intervention in a war over Taiwan.<sup>116</sup>

In this case the speculation, offered without any substantive evidence regarding Chinese intentions, is that Beijing would threaten or use nuclear weapons first to intimidate other powers (presumably including both nuclear and non-nuclear ones) in order to attain some political objective. If directed against a non-nuclear power, this would directly violate the formal positive security assurances that China has made never to do this, as well as its long-standing No First Use (NFU) policy.<sup>117</sup> If directed against a nuclear power such as the United States (as in a Taiwan crisis or conflict), Beijing's use of nuclear weapons would not only violate China's NFU policy but also

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<sup>115</sup> See House Armed Services Committee. "Future of Defense Task Force Report 2020." "The ability of the U.S. to leverage offensive and defensive capabilities ... is paramount to maintaining the global balance of power as well as strategic and conventional military superiority." 2019 National Defense Strategy Commission (charged with reviewing 2018 NDS): "We affirm strongly the view that the global role the United States has played for many generations has benefited our nation enormously, and that this role rests upon a foundation of unmatched military power. Today, however, our margin of superiority is profoundly diminished in key areas. There are urgent challenges that must be addressed if the United States is to avoid lasting damage to its national security"; "2017 National Security Strategy": Our task is to ensure that American military superiority endures."

<sup>116</sup> U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission.. "2021 Report to Congress." [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021\\_Annual\\_Report\\_to\\_Congress.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021_Annual_Report_to_Congress.pdf). Also see Su, Alice. "China's nuclear and military buildup raises risk of conflict in Asia." *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-11-17/la-fg-china-military-buildup-nuclear-missiles>.

<sup>117</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "China's Non-Proliferation Policy – Positions and Measures." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, June 3, 2004. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cqvienna/eng/dbtyw/fks/t127620.htm>; Beijing reiterated the NFU policy in its most recent 2019 defense white paper; China's nuclear force structure and doctrine reflect the constraints of its NFU policy. See *Zhanlue xue [Science of military strategy]*, rev. ed. Ed. Xiao Tianliang. Beijing. Guofang daxue chubanshe, 2017.



prove highly problematic against a power that could without doubt destroy the Chinese nation in retaliation.

Moreover, China has possessed the capacity to level such improbable nuclear threats for many years. And studies show that coercive nuclear threats are difficult to be made credibly, and that many of the states with which China might contend (including Japan, South Korea, and Australia) are also under a U.S. nuclear umbrella. Why a larger number of nuclear weapons and a more sophisticated and diversified delivery system should make China more likely to break assurances and take such enormous risks is left unexplained. One of course cannot assume that Beijing would never level nuclear threats, or employ a nuclear weapon first in a conflict, or even use nuclear weapons to shield. But the likelihood of either such highly dangerous action is low, absent U.S. actions that clearly threaten the existence of the Chinese regime.

Some observers have argued, in light of recent indications of increases in the number of Chinese land-based missile silos, that Beijing is strengthening its nuclear capabilities to permit it to undertake conventional aggression (e.g., toward Taiwan) and to deter U.S. military intervention.

Regarding China's conventional missile capabilities, one notably alarmist example occurs in a publication of the above-mentioned U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission. It states: “China *plans* to threaten or use its conventional missile arsenal against both regional countries and U.S. military assets and bases in Asia.”<sup>118</sup> (emphasis added)

This source provides no evidence of such a supposed Chinese “plan.” It seems simply to assume such an intention based on China's possession of regional missiles capable of striking Asian targets. Using such analytical logic, one can also say that the United States “plans” to threaten or use its forward-deployed forces in Asia against China or other regional nations, given its ability to strike those locations.

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<sup>118</sup> Stokes, Jacob. “China's Missile Program and U.S. Withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.” U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2019. [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20and%20INF\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20and%20INF_0.pdf).

Another example of such poorly grounded, alarmist speculation about Chinese military intentions concerns supposed PLA plans to attack Taiwan. One American PLA analyst has asserted that Beijing will likely attack Taiwan once it achieves the military capability to do so to a high level of confidence, and speculates that this could occur anytime soon.<sup>119</sup> And even a former commander of INDOPACOM has stated that China might use force against Taiwan by 2027.<sup>120</sup>

No strong, much less conclusive, evidence supports such an assertion. While recent increased PLA activities near Taiwan certainly raise serious concerns, it is by no means clear that such activities signal an overall clear intent to attack the island, much less to do so once Beijing believes it has the capacity to succeed in such an effort. To the contrary, a close reading of the timing of such activities suggests that they are more logically understood as deterrence signals sent in response to specific actions taken by the U.S. or Taiwan, or more broadly as indications of efforts to strengthen China's overall defense capabilities along its maritime periphery.<sup>121</sup>

This kind of extreme rhetoric is also found in nonauthoritative assessments of what China would supposedly do after it were somehow able to militarily seize and hold Taiwan. Echoing the so-called domino theory of the Cold War, some analysts speculate that such a development would lead Beijing to "go global," or at the very least "go regional," involving the use of its military to seize areas beyond Taiwan or other disputed territories.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "Deterring PRC Aggression Toward Taiwan"; Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "The Taiwan Temptation." *Foreign Affairs*, August 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-03/china-taiwan-war-temptation>; Swaine, Michael D. "Warnings of an imminent Chinese invasion of Taiwan miss the mark." *Responsible Statecraft*, June 8, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/06/08/how-warnings-of-an-imminent-chinese-invasion-of-taiwan-miss-the-mark/>.

<sup>120</sup> Shelbourne, Mallory. "Davidson: China Could Try to Take Control of Taiwan In 'Next Six Years.'"

<sup>121</sup> Sweeny, Mike. "How Militarily Useful Would Taiwan be to China?" *Defense Priorities*, 2022.

<https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/how-militarily-useful-would-taiwan-be-to-china>; U-Jin, Adrian Ang, and Olli Pekka Suorsa. "Understanding China's Aerial Incursions Into Taiwan's ADIZ." *The Diplomat*, June 2, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/understanding-chinas-aerial-incursions-into-taiwans-adiz/>; Bush, Richard, Bonnie Glaser, and Ryan Hass. "Opinion: Don't Help China By Hyping Risk Of War Over Taiwan." *NPR*, April 8, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/08/984524521/opinion-dont-help-china-by-hyping-risk-of-war-over-taiwan>; Glaser, Bonnie, and Matthew Funaiolo. "China's Provocations Around Taiwan Aren't a Crisis." *Foreign Policy*, May 15, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/15/chinas-provocations-around-taiwan-arent-a-crisis/>.

<sup>122</sup> Colby, Elbridge A. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*. New Haven, Conn. Yale University Press, 2021; Yoshihara, Toshi, and Jack Bianci. *Seizing on Weakness: Allied Strategy for Competing with China's Globalizing Military*. Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2021. <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/seizing-on-weakness-allied-strategy-for-competing-with-chinas-globalizing-military>.

Such a prospect has even led one senior U.S. Asia defense official to state publicly in congressional testimony, reportedly with White House approval, that Taiwan occupies a critical “strategic node” in a first island chain defense perimeter against China. The apparent assumption is that, if Beijing is allowed to control Taiwan, the rest of the region will be under a dire threat of military conquest by China.<sup>123</sup>

Although no one can predict with confidence what China’s ultimate strategic goals might be, there is again no evidence of such a Chinese intention of regional (much less global) military conquest, and little evidence that Taiwan is necessarily a vital and logical jumping-off point for such an ambitious objective.<sup>124</sup> The only factor that could cause Beijing to conclude that it would be worth taking the enormous risks involved in goose-stepping militarily across Asia (and possibly beyond) would be a clear U.S., Japanese, and larger Western commitment to contain, weaken, and eventually destroy the PRC regime and collapse China economically by controlling Asia and cutting off vital imports. Some observers, such as Elbridge Colby, argue that China is likely to undertake such a Chinese drive for hegemony, and that the only way to counter it is to create an Asian-wide, anti-China coalition with the clear ability to militarily deter any such moves.<sup>125</sup> But this is supposed to happen without causing the Chinese to fear that the coalition arrayed against it wishes to weaken China and overthrow the PRC regime.

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<sup>123</sup> Ratner, Ely. “The Future of U.S. Policy on Taiwan.” Statement by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs before the Committee on Foreign Relations, 2021.

[https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821\\_Ratner\\_Testimony1.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821_Ratner_Testimony1.pdf).

<sup>124</sup> Sweeny. “How Militarily Useful Would Taiwan be to China?”

<sup>125</sup> Colby, Elbridge A. *The Strategy of Denial*.



Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson transits the South China Sea, Jan. 13, 2022 (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Haydn N. Smith).

One of the most egregious examples of a threat-inflating yet also deeply erroneous and misleading, nonauthoritative source on overall Chinese military strategy and intentions is a book, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, by Michael Pillsbury, a former Trump administration defense official and longtime China observer.<sup>126</sup>

This study, widely admired among some U.S. military officers, relies heavily on inaccurate and distorted interpretations of Chinese sources to argue that China “developed a secret plan in the 1950s to surpass the United States within 100 years, and that it has been systematically implementing that plan ever since.”<sup>127</sup> In truth, the book provides no verifiable evidence of such a plan, whether secret or public. To the contrary,

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<sup>126</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York. St Martin's Griffin, 2016.

<sup>127</sup> Johnston, Alastair Iain. “Shaky Foundations: The ‘Intellectual Architecture’ of Trump’s China Policy.” *Survival* 61 (2), April 2019. 189–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1589096>.

the author in places distorts (or misinterprets) the meaning of the Chinese sources he cites to make his argument.<sup>128</sup>

*There is no evidence of such a Chinese intention of regional (much less global) military conquest, and little evidence that Taiwan is necessarily a vital and logical jumping-off point for such an ambitious objective.*

Another vastly more credible, yet still in some ways highly questionable, nonauthoritative source, written by the current China director on the National Security Council, is *The Long Game* by Rush Doshi. This study, regarded by some serving U.S. officials and others in Washington as the final word on Chinese security intentions, is far more legitimate and well-researched than the Pillsbury book. It includes many useful and insightful, evidence-based assessments about Chinese security perceptions and Beijing's strategy for countering what it sees as U.S. containment efforts.

Doshi argues that Beijing has been pursuing a systematic, staged, and well-integrated strategy to "displace American order" both regionally and globally since at least the early 90s, moving from initial efforts to "blunt" U.S. power, then "build" China's own power, and finally to "expand" its own power both regionally and globally at U.S. expense. While offering plentiful evidence for Beijing's desire to reduce the capacity of the U.S. to contain and subjugate China, the book provides few sources to substantiate the notion that these three stages of Chinese foreign policy exist as a coherent,

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<sup>128</sup> Johnston. "Shaky Foundations"; Mattis, Peter. "A Shaky Case for Deception." War on the Rocks, February 19, 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/02/a-shaky-case-for-chinese-deception-a-review-of-the-hundred-year-marathon/>; Blanchette, Jude. "A Secret Plot by an Ancient Civilization to Take Over the World: Book Review of Michael Pillsbury." China Focus, April 2, 2015. <https://chinafocus.ucsd.edu/2015/04/02/a-secret-plot-by-an-ancient-civilization-to-take-over-the-world-book-review-of-michael-pillsbury/>.



systematic strategy, and even less that the Chinese leadership has committed itself as a necessity to replacing the U.S. as a global military, political, and economic hegemon.<sup>129</sup>

The book relies heavily on the nonauthoritative comments of a small number of Chinese scholars,<sup>130</sup> and a shaky interpretation of the meaning of Chinese leadership phrases such as “great changes unseen in a century” to support that point.<sup>131</sup> Equally important, it fails to provide clear evidence in Chinese statements of an intention for China to become “the” leading global power, as opposed to “a” leading global power.<sup>132</sup>

In fact, some scholars who have closely examined many Chinese sources on China’s desired role in the global order stress that the language used indeed reflects a Chinese interest in playing “a” leading role in reforming current arrangements, not displacing them.<sup>133</sup>

None of the above proves that Chinese leaders do not seek to replace the U.S. as a regional or global military hegemon. But it does show that perhaps the most influential studies purporting to conclusively establish such a goal as a long-term Chinese plan in fact do no such thing in any conclusive and convincing manner. Hence, assuming such a vital Chinese goal in formulating U.S. policy toward China is inadvisable and potentially dangerous.

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<sup>129</sup> Heer, Paul. “New Book Hints at Biden’s Strategic Approach to China.” *The National Interest*, July 7, 2021.

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/new-book-hints-biden-s-strategic-approach-china-189264>; Latham, Andrew A., and Ben Porter. “Rush Doshi, The long game: China’s grand strategy to displace American order.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, December 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2011209>; Mastro, Oriana Skylar. “China’s Grand Strategy.” *Asia Policy*, 29 (1), 2022. 161–172. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2022.0011>; Rachman, Gideon. “China is still a long way from being a superpower.” *The Financial Times*, July 19, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/bdaad457-9e22-4d74-b614-6cc44a613a0c>.

<sup>130</sup> For example, Jin Canrong [金灿荣]. “Jin Canrong: The Fourth Industrial Revolution is mainly a competition between the U.S. and China, and China has a greater chance of winning” [“金灿荣：第四次工业革命主要是中美之间的竞争，且中国胜算更大”]. *Guancha* [观察者网], July 29, 2019. [https://www.guancha.cn/JinCanRong/2019\\_07\\_29\\_511347\\_s.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/JinCanRong/2019_07_29_511347_s.shtml).

<sup>131</sup> Nathan, Andrew J. “What Exactly Is America’s China Policy?” *Foreign Policy*, April 14, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/14/us-china-biden-strategy-geopolitics/>; Heer. “New Book Hints at Biden’s Strategic Approach to China.”

<sup>132</sup> As one leading expert on China’s international affairs commented in a private discussion with the author and others: “The book’s assertion that it “has demonstrated [that] China seeks to displace the United States not only from regional but also global leadership” [is false]. The book instead has suggested China’s possible aspirations and demonstrated why it is conceivable that these may be the goals of China’s grand strategy” (emphasis added); Also see Heer. “New Book Hints at Biden’s Strategic Approach to China.”

<sup>133</sup> Discussion with long-term PLA specialist. For example, see Lai, David, and Roy Kamphausen. *The Chinese People’s Liberation Army in 2025*. Washington, D.C. U.S. Army War College, 2015. <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/2015/pubs/the-chinese-peoples-liberation-army-in-2025/>.



*The most influential studies purporting to conclusively establish [global hegemony] as a long-term Chinese plan in fact do no such thing in any conclusive and convincing manner.*

Taken together, the assessment of both the strong proclivities of decision-makers, defense analysts, and societies in general to inflate threats by other nations, and the clear evidence of such threat inflation in the case of U.S. views toward the Chinese military and PRC defense strategy, show a clear need to reexamine U.S. threat perceptions of China and the policies derived from them.

# Assessing the future Chinese military threat

The PLA today is simply not the “pacing threat” across the board or the imminent peer competitor that many U.S. officials and Washington-based commentators assert is the case. It has certainly made significant advances in specific weapons systems and military technological areas, expanded its capacity to project significant levels of force along its maritime periphery, can now operate its navy in small groupings at significant distances from China, and has acquired robust space, cyber, and nuclear capabilities. However, the PLA still displays significant deficiencies in weaponry, training and education, operations, and experience, some of them deeply rooted and difficult to correct.

These shortcomings and features greatly limit the PLA’s current capacity to challenge the U.S. military in conventional contingencies beyond the first island chain and call for a closer questioning of the prevailing assumption that China is committed to (and capable of) replacing the United States as a global military hegemon.

And while the PLA has in some ways reached or even exceeded in some respects a rough parity with U.S. INDOPACOM forces (in the numbers of some naval and air platforms and its ability to target U.S. ships with ballistic missiles) that has ended American military primacy along at least the first island chain, it has by no means acquired the capacity to confidently seize and hold Taiwan against likely U.S. opposition, much less pose a credible non-nuclear threat to the Japanese home islands—especially considering the capabilities of Japan’s military.<sup>134</sup> As argued above,

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<sup>134</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2021.” The report states (117): “An attempt to invade Taiwan would likely strain PRC’s armed forces and invite international intervention. These stresses, combined with the PRCs combat force attrition and the complexity of urban warfare and counterinsurgency, even assuming a successful landing and breakout, make an amphibious invasion of Taiwan a significant political and military risk for Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party”; Sacks, David. “Enhancing U.S.–Japan Coordination for a Taiwan Conflict.” Council on Foreign Relations, 2022. [https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/Enhancing%20U.S.-Japan%20Coordination%20for%20a%20Taiwan%20Conflict\\_DP\\_1.pdf](https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/Enhancing%20U.S.-Japan%20Coordination%20for%20a%20Taiwan%20Conflict_DP_1.pdf); Sweeny. “How Militarily Useful Would Taiwan be to China?”

any such actions would involve enormous risks with at best uncertain outcomes and likely produce extensive damage to all parties involved.<sup>135</sup>

In fact, the Taiwan issue remains primarily a political problem in which the likelihood of the use of force is heavily influenced by political actions taken by all parties that would increase or decrease the sense of threat involved.<sup>136</sup>

*The PLA today is simply not the “pacing threat” across the board or the imminent peer competitor that many U.S. officials and Washington-based commentators assert is the case.*

Despite these limits on China’s military capabilities, it is clear that the shift in the balance of military power along China’s maritime periphery toward a rough parity or even a Chinese advantage in some areas increases the chances of miscalculation in the employment of military force that could lead to a crisis and even conflict between the United States and China. This could occur over Taiwan, disputed maritime claims in the East and South China Seas, or a variety of possible incidents arising from close-quarter, cat-and-mouse actions of different types between U.S. and Chinese air and naval assets in the Western Pacific. In a regional environment of uncertain parity or a limited Chinese advantage, any of these events could involve efforts by each side to test the resolve of the other or to achieve (or defend against) a permanent advantage, with Beijing acting out of excessive confidence in its greater capabilities and Washington overreacting to Chinese actions in an effort to show that it has not lost its military edge.

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<sup>135</sup> Odell, Rachel Esplin, et al. “Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, June 2022.

<sup>136</sup> Swaine, Michael D. “Taiwan Troubles: Why Washington Tolerates China’s Territorial Flex.” *The National Interest*, May 18, 2021. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/taiwan-troubles-why-washington-tolerates-china%E2%80%99s-territorial-flex-185488>; Swaine, Michael D. “US official signals stunning shift in the way we interpret ‘One China’ policy.” Responsible Statecraft, December 10, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/10/us-official-signals-stunning-shift-in-the-way-we-interpret-one-china-policy/>; Swaine, Michael D. “Chinese official’s unusually blunt comments over US–Taiwan raises eyebrows.” Responsible Statecraft, January 28, 2022. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/01/28/chinese-officials-unusually-blunt-comments-over-us-taiwan-raises-eyebrows/>.

In other words, assuming a continued, strong U.S. maritime military presence in the Asia-Pacific, the most likely threat that China's increased regional military capabilities presents today or in the near- to medium term (to about 2035) is not of a unilateral, aggressive, out-of-the-blue Chinese lunge at Taiwan or elsewhere deriving from a radical shift in the balance of military forces against the U.S. and Japan. The most prominent threat is of a high-risk miscalculation in the use of military force by one or both sides arising from overconfidence or insecurity, in response to what are perceived as new political actions that more directly challenge a vital Chinese or American interest. That is, the primary military threat that China poses to the United States over at least the medium term derives from an interactive political dynamic over regional political differences.

Countering such a contingent threat requires more than just a convincing level of U.S. military deterrence toward China. It also requires creating a less adversarial and zero-sum political and economic relationship alongside a more stable, credible, and limited set of regional military deployments, activities, and capabilities by both sides that together serve to reduce security competition and the current high levels of suspicion and uncertainty that could lead to miscalculation.

In looking toward the longer term (post-2035), barring an unlikely collapse or near-collapse of the Chinese economy or a miraculous improvement in Sino-U.S. relations, Beijing will continue to increase the size, sophistication, lethality, and range of many of its most critical air, naval, missile, electronic, and space-related weapons systems and relevant support systems and infrastructures.

These improvements will undoubtedly reduce, or in some cases eliminate, several of the PLA's overall deficiencies summarized above. Such advances will certainly continue to challenge U.S. military capabilities, primarily those in the Western Pacific and of relevance to a Taiwan conflict. For example, Beijing will certainly add to its fleet of more capable surface and subsurface vessels, as well as amphibious platforms and airlift

capacity for soldiers and equipment, thus enhancing its ability to prosecute either a blockade of Taiwan or a direct attack on the island.

| Comparison of U.S. Military and PLA Capabilities out to 2035 <sup>137</sup> |             |  |
|---|-------------|--|
| U.S. Future Capabilities (USAF and USN)                                     |             | PLA Future Capabilities  |
| Total naval vessels   | approx. 355 | 425–460 (excluding minesweepers, small amphibious ships, and sundry auxiliary ships) |
| Aircraft carriers   | 12          | 5–6  |
| Cruisers and destroyers   | 104         | 60   |
| Attack subs   | 66          | 60 (14–16 SSNs)–74 (28 SSNs) <sup>138</sup>  |
| Small surface combatants  | 52          | 135–160  |

<sup>137</sup> Odell. *Active Denial*; U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2021”; Gunzinger, Mark, Carl Rehberg, and Lukas Autenried. “Five Priorities for the Air Force’s Future Combat Air Force.” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis, January 22, 2020. [https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Five\\_Priorities\\_For\\_The\\_Air\\_Forces\\_Future\\_Combat\\_Air\\_Force\\_Web.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Five_Priorities_For_The_Air_Forces_Future_Combat_Air_Force_Web.pdf); Congressional Research Service. “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress.” Congressional Research Service, March 8, 2022. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>; Congressional Research Service. “Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress.” Congressional Research Service, February 22, 2022. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/RL32665.pdf>; Swaine, Michael D., Wenyan Deng, and Aube Rey Lescure. “Creating a Stable Asia: An Agenda for a U.S.–China Balance of Power.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP\\_Swaine\\_U.S.-Asia\\_Final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_Swaine_U.S.-Asia_Final.pdf); McDevitt. *China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power*.

<sup>138</sup> The higher estimate incorporates the author’s calculation based on McDevitt’s expectation that China might be capable of producing 1.5 SSNs/year.

|   |       |       |
|---|-------|-------|
| 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup><br>generation<br>fighters | 2,673 | 2,200 |
| Strategic<br>bombers  | 172+  | ~160  |

China will also no doubt continue to enhance its ability to counter U.S. and allied submarine, surface, and air attacks via improvements in ASW, ASCMs, conventionally armed ballistic missiles, and other weapons systems.<sup>139</sup>

Many of these improved capabilities will increase not only China’s threat to Taiwan, but also its ability to leverage its position regarding maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas. Thus, all these developments in PLA capabilities will most likely increase U.S. concern over perceived threats to its interests and position in Asia, especially if Americans continue to believe that only a clear level of U.S. military predominance in that region can preserve the peace. That local predominance is gone and is very unlikely to return.

Nonetheless, despite such likely future long-term Chinese military improvements, it will on balance remain far from clear that China will amass a sufficient level of overall military capability and leverage to overcome the hugely negative military, political, and economic consequences of any all-out attack on Taiwan, especially if, as expected, the U.S. continues to improve its own overall military capabilities in the Indo–Pacific. As the above table suggests, the PLA is not projected to have an overwhelming level of Taiwan-related weapons platforms vis-à-vis the United States over at least the next two decades (and possibly beyond, given the likely enduring limits on military effectiveness noted above). And this is especially true if Japan is also involved in any confrontation.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Odell, et al. “Active Denial.”; U.S. Department of Defense. “Military and Security Developments 2021.”

<sup>140</sup> Grossman, Derek. “Biden Administration Shows Unwavering Support for Taiwan.” The Rand Blog, October 20, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/10/biden-administration-shows-unwavering-support-for-taiwan.html>; Mastro, Oriana Skylar. “The Taiwan Temptation.”



Moreover, in addition to improvements in weapons platforms, the U.S. is acquiring large numbers of long-range, anti-ship cruise missiles that can be launched from the air or sea outside of Chinese air defense ranges. These could prove decisive in a conflict over Taiwan.<sup>141</sup>

For a host of reasons, and despite fears to the contrary by some observers, Washington almost certainly would not permit China to prosecute a direct attack on Taiwan in the foreseeable future. Indeed, many China specialists strongly believe that the Chinese leadership assumes that Washington will intervene militarily in a Taiwan conflict.<sup>142</sup> Moreover, it is unlikely that any such military conflict over Taiwan would end quickly or result in insignificant losses on all sides. Such a direct engagement between U.S. and Chinese forces would risk rapid and severe vertical and horizontal escalation, including to the level of nuclear threats or even nuclear conflict.<sup>143</sup>

Some Chinese writings convey an unduly optimistic attitude toward nuclear escalation in a Taiwan conflict, and some Chinese specialists on Taiwan believe they enjoy a superior position in the so-called balance of fervor between the U.S. and China over Taiwan, thus suggesting that the U.S. would not run the risks involved in leveling nuclear threats.<sup>144</sup>

Nonetheless, both American credibility as a great power and the apparently increasing willingness of both Washington and Beijing to consider and possibly prepare for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in a high-stakes conflict such as Taiwan argue that the U.S. and China might consider nuclear options if either side were facing the prospect of a

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<sup>141</sup> Private conversation with a U.S. and China military specialist working for the U.S. government. This specialist stresses that there is no good defense against large numbers of anti-ship missiles.

<sup>142</sup> Mastro. "The Taiwan Temptation"; Glaser, Bonnie, and Elmira Bayrasli. "Trouble over Taiwan." Project Syndicate, November 23, 2021.

<https://www.project-syndicate.org/podcasts/trouble-over-taiwan><https://armscontrolcenter.org/china-is-not-the-new-soviet-union/>.

<sup>143</sup> Sweeny, Mike. "Why a Taiwan Conflict Could Go Nuclear." Defense Priorities, 2021.

<https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/why-a-taiwan-conflict-could-go-nuclear>.

<sup>144</sup> Heginbotham, Eric. "China Maritime Report No. 14: Chinese Views of the Military Balance in the Western Pacific." China Maritime Studies Institute, 2021. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/14>; Cunningham, Fiona S., and M. Taylor Fravel. "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation." *International Security* 44 (2), 2019. 61–109.

[https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00359](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00359); Freeman, Chas. "War with China over Taiwan?" Chasfreeman.net, December 17, 2020.

<https://chasfreeman.net/war-with-china-over-taiwan/>; Global Times editorial. "China's iron will stronger than US' 'rock solid' commitment to Taiwan." *Global Times*, October 14, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236363.shtml>; Global Times staff reporters. "China will have better chance to solve Taiwan question in 3–5 years: experts." *Global Times*, December 11, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1241219.shtml>; personal discussions with Chinese scholars and officials over the years.

clear defeat. These fears have been expressed to the author in many dialogues with Chinese defense analysts and scholars.

And even in the absence of nuclear escalation, any major, direct Sino–American conflict over Taiwan would produce huge losses in personnel and material on all sides, and gravely damage Taiwan in the process.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, there is little doubt that the U.S. would also attempt to level crippling economic and diplomatic sanctions and embargoes on China and pressure other nations to do the same.

*Even in the absence of nuclear escalation, any major, direct Sino–American conflict over Taiwan would produce huge losses in personnel and material on all sides, and gravely damage Taiwan in the process.*

Thus, all of these high possibilities involving the dangers of a military conflict would almost certainly continue to deter Beijing from making a straightforward, purely military-based assessment of the benefits of using force against Taiwan. Ultimately, any such Chinese move over the long term will likely remain subject to decisions made regarding the political and strategic motives of the United States toward Taiwan, alongside appropriate military deterrence measures. One can never categorically discount the possibility that Beijing would grossly miscalculate and attempt to militarily coerce or forcibly seize Taiwan simply because it believed it could do so with a high likelihood of success. However, the most probable development that could induce Beijing to run the enormous risks involved in attacking the island would be if the U.S. were to adopt policies and actions explicitly intended to permanently separate Taiwan from China.<sup>146</sup> Such moves would almost certainly place enormous pressure on any

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<sup>145</sup> Culver, John. "The unfinished Chinese civil war." *The Interpreter*, September 30, 2020. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/unfinished-chinese-civil-war>; Schneider, Jacqueline. "Defending Taiwan is a worthy goal. But are we ready for heavy casualties?" *The Washington Post*, January 24, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/01/24/taiwan-defense-hawks-cost/>; Odell, et al. "Active Denial."

<sup>146</sup> Goldstein. "China's Grand Strategy Under Xi Jinping."

Chinese regime to prevent such an outcome by moving decisively to resolve the issue in its favor. And the only way that it could do this would be via military force.<sup>147</sup>

Aside from the Taiwan issue, some observers argue that China could at some time over the long term amass sufficient capabilities to militarily push the United States out of Asia and dominate the region, denying Washington air and naval access and hence support for commerce and critical allies.<sup>148</sup>

Yet it is hard to see how this could happen, short of an inconceivably reckless Chinese decision to initiate a major Sino–U.S. war. As suggested above, Beijing is unlikely to amass an overwhelming number of naval warships, missiles, and aircraft (and the infrastructure and personnel capabilities needed to support them) sufficient to intimidate and eventually compel the withdrawal of forward-deployed U.S. forces from the Western Pacific, especially when one adds Japanese forces into the mix. Indeed, there are no signs that Washington is losing either the will or the capacity to remain a major military actor in the region, or that other Asian countries concerned by China’s military rise will fail to respond if Beijing begins threatening their vital interests via attempts at military intimidation.

If efforts, discussed below, to build a more cooperative and inclusive Asian security environment fail (or are never seriously attempted) and the Sino–U.S. rivalry worsens, major Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, or Indonesia could conceivably bandwagon with Beijing or become neutral. However, it is far more likely, given the history of relations between these countries and the United States (except perhaps for Indonesia), that they will strengthen their military capabilities, with U.S. assistance, and possibly even coordinate their policies to moderate the deepening Sino–U.S. antagonism and rebuild trust across the region.

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<sup>147</sup> Swaine, Michael D., Jessica Lee, and Rachel Esplin Odell. “Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New U.S. Strategy in East Asia.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2021. <https://quincyinst.org/2021/01/11/toward-an-inclusive-balanced-regional-order-a-new-u-s-strategy-in-east-asia/>.

<sup>148</sup> Work, Robert, and Greg Grant. “Beating the Americans at their own Game: An Offset Strategy with Chinese Characteristics.” Center for a New American Security, 2019. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/beating-the-americans-at-their-own-game>; Heath, Timothy R., Derek Grossman, and Asha Clark. “China’s Quest for Global Primacy: An Analysis of Chinese International and Defense Strategies to Outcompete the United States.” The Rand Corp., 2021. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA447-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA447-1.html).

All this indicates that, aside from the danger of miscalculation leading to conflict regarding Taiwan, the primary regional military threat will emerge not from a reckless and dangerous Chinese effort to militarily eject the U.S. from Asia but from the political and security instabilities resulting from efforts by the U.S., China, and other nations to deter one another in an extreme, zero-sum manner within an increasingly hostile and polarized Asian landscape.

In such a complex, unstable security environment, the medium- to long-term military threat posed by China will continue to be a function of the ability or inability of the nations involved to reduce security competition and increase overall incentives for greater cooperation and mutual accommodation, politically, economically, technologically, and militarily. If China and the U.S. decide they must each compete for regional military dominance to ensure their security and prosperity, China's military threat to the U.S. (and the U.S. threat to China) will obviously grow, fueling an increasingly tense and polarizing regional arms race. Avoiding this outcome by reducing the incentives for escalating Sino-U.S. security competition over potentially volatile issues such as Taiwan or even lower-level maritime disputes should be the primary objective of all Asian nations (including China and the United States and its allies), in place of a search for stability through an open-ended arms race and ever-greater levels of military deterrence through dominance. In this effort, middle powers such as Japan, South Korea, and others should play a more active role.

Beyond the Western Pacific, there is no question that the PLA can today inflict considerable nuclear damage on nations outside of China's immediate vicinity, including the U.S. (and in some cases much more limited conventional damage). And there is little doubt that its long-range capacity to strike other nations will continue to grow in the years ahead. But developing capabilities to deny or at least greatly challenge the capacity of the U.S. or other potential adversaries to seize and hold critical territories and waters at some distance from China (such as the Malacca Strait) in the event of war, and expanding those capabilities to a much higher level in support of a strategy designed to control distant areas over long periods of time beyond a wartime condition

are two very different things. While the former is conceivably possible (although still not likely) within the next two decades or so in relation to some areas outside China's immediate vicinity, the latter is virtually impossible, if the U.S., with the help of other nations, continues to sustain its capacity to project sizable forces from its shores.<sup>149</sup>

And the task becomes even greater for Beijing if one considers the oft-mentioned claim that China desires to become a truly global military hegemon. To become such a power requires a force structure capable of successfully fending off any attempt to defeat its components within any ocean or air space, and to safeguard passage to virtually any major world port. The U.S. has enjoyed something approaching this capacity for decades. China is far from attaining it, and currently has no clear imperative to do so.



A nuclear-powered Type 094A Jin-class ballistic missile submarine of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy is seen during a military display in the South China Sea April 12, 2018 (REUTERS/Stringer).

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<sup>149</sup> This paragraph and the remaining ones in this section are drawn from: Swaine. *The PLA Navy's Strategic Transformation to the 'Far Seas.'*



Anything approximating such an ambitious objective would require a costly, long-term force buildup and support system involving not only the acquisition of much larger numbers of sizable, blue water surface and subsurface combatants, and long-range ballistic and cruise missiles and fighter aircraft than at present, but also the air and replenishment capabilities to protect and sustain those platforms over considerable periods of time and at great distances from China.<sup>150</sup> It would also likely require a large expeditionary force capacity able to project formations of ground forces at great distance. All this, in turn, would require the creation of permanent bases or logistics stations across all the major oceans. Although China has established a small base at Djibouti, and could very well create others elsewhere, this is a far cry in scope and number from the over 700 military installations the U.S. maintains across the globe.<sup>151</sup> China's interest in and capability to create such a massive global presence is by no means a forgone conclusion.

This does not mean that China will eschew developing a military with a significant global presence. It has already done this to some extent in the naval realm.<sup>152</sup> But it does suggest that such a presence could take many forms well below anything approaching that of the U.S. military today, including relatively small flotillas or expeditionary groups capable of conducting some important missions short of achieving control over all critical ocean areas.

It is certainly not inconceivable that growing threats to China's SLOCs and overseas economic interests could one day cause China's leaders to fundamentally reassess the nation's strategic interests and goals in the direction of a costly, dominance-oriented global military strategy. Nonetheless, it would be reckless to assume that such a reassessment is inevitable and that the many factors in favor of cooperation and balance as a major part of China's present-day global strategy will disappear.

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<sup>150</sup> Erickson, Andrew. "Power vs. Distance: China's Global Maritime Interests and Investments in the Far Seas" in "Strategic Asia 2019: China's Expanding Strategic Ambitions." Eds. Tellis, Ashley J., Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills. The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019.  
[www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/PLAN\\_China's-Global-Maritime-Interests-and-Investments-in-the-Far-Seas-NBR\\_Strategic-Asia-2019-China's-Expanding-Strategic-Ambitions.pdf](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/PLAN_China's-Global-Maritime-Interests-and-Investments-in-the-Far-Seas-NBR_Strategic-Asia-2019-China's-Expanding-Strategic-Ambitions.pdf).

<sup>151</sup> Reuters staff. "China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti." Reuters, August 1, 2017.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-djibouti/china-formally-opens-first-overseas-military-base-in-djibouti-idUSKBN1AH3E3>.

<sup>152</sup> Congressional Research Service. "China Naval Modernization."



To an even greater extent than in the Taiwan case, the costs and risks involved in a Chinese attempt to displace the U.S. as the dominant global military power are huge and unlikely to diminish to such a degree in the decades ahead that Beijing would conclude it is worth the effort to undertake — unless, of course, the U.S. makes it clear that it is using its global military dominance to support efforts to strangle China and overthrow its government.

In addition, at least some Chinese still seem to believe that transitioning to an all-out competition with the U.S. for global military supremacy (as part of a drive for global predominance) is unnecessary or simply unrealistic, for several reasons: first, many countries, including American allies, resist aligning themselves entirely with an extreme, zero-sum approach to China, either militarily or economically. Second, in the Chinese view, American relative economic and in some respects political power is in fact declining. Third, not all American policy figures ascribe to the more extreme, zero-sum versions of the American outlook toward China's goals. Fourth, globalization and the overall desire of the foreign business community to trade with China will continue to reduce American incentives to deepen containment. Fifth, the overall costs of moving to a zero-sum, dominance-oriented adversarial strategy will remain high for China, especially given its many, arguably worsening, domestic challenges.<sup>153</sup>

Given all the above, the Chinese must realize that any effort to achieve global military dominance over the U.S. will prove extremely costly, could ultimately fail, or could place it in a virtually endless, mutually debilitating zero-sum military rivalry with Washington. This implies that, despite its ambitious goals and increasing suspicion and pushback toward the United States, Beijing's policies will necessarily allow for some level of flexibility that can make global competition more constructive and less destructive, while keeping many doors open to some level of meaningful cooperation between the two powers, including in the military security arena.

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<sup>153</sup> Author's private discussions with Chinese scholars and officials.

# Conclusion: A more realistic threat assessment

The preceding analysis indicates that threat inflation is a major problem in evaluating China's military capabilities and the military security-related intentions of China's leadership. With some notable exceptions (such as elements of many of the DoD PLA reports), U.S. authoritative assessments (and especially nonauthoritative ones) often employ inadequate, distorted, or incorrect evidence, use grossly hyperbolic language, display sloppy or illogical thinking, or rely on broad-brush assertions that seem to derive more from narrow political, ideological, or emotional impulses than from any objective search for truth.

This inflationary analysis involves general characterizations of China as an all-of-society "existential threat" to the United States or slightly less ominously, as "a threat to our collective security, prosperity, and democratic way of life"; or as a fundamental threat to a "stable and open international system." China is also routinely described by many sources as an "enemy" or "adversary" seeking to dominate and control not only the Asia-Pacific region but also the entire globe by engaging in a "staggering" military buildup aimed at dominating the United States and all other powers.

Such views most often rely on deductive reasoning, taking, in a highly selective manner, individual facts or data points as confirmations of pre-existing, supposedly widely accepted principles or beliefs. Given such an a priori intellectual construct, these views rarely attempt to examine alternative explanations for the available evidence that allegedly support such beliefs, or to identify the conditionality or limits of the often totalistic or categorical conclusions reached, or the major obstacles that China still faces in achieving its military goals.

In particular, rarely, if ever, is such analysis placed in the context of a larger dynamic involving an interactive security dilemma in which the actions of the United States

contribute to negative Chinese policies and behavior in the military and broader security realms. The implication is often that, almost regardless of what the U.S. has done or might do, Beijing is committed as a vital necessity to destroying or fundamentally weakening the United States through both military and nonmilitary means.

There is little doubt that China is undertaking actions that limit and even weaken U.S. power and influence in some political, economic, social, and military arenas. But framing the challenge Beijing poses in categorical and exceedingly alarmist, worst-case ways, as both authoritative and nonauthoritative sources have repeatedly done, removes the need to determine the limits of Chinese threats. China becomes 10 feet tall, undeterred from wanting to destroy the United States except by a massive U.S. counterforce, thus requiring virtually unlimited levels of U.S. resources and commitment.

Of greatest concern, in such an environment, historical disputes over Taiwan, or maritime issues in the South China Sea, become fundamental zero-sum strategic struggles requiring ever-more forceful pushback. All this closes off opportunities for mutual accommodation or policy moderation, which become labeled as appeasement or worse, and makes it virtually impossible for a U.S. administration to speak publicly about the need, not just the possibility, for cooperating meaningfully with Beijing on critical issues. In an inflated threat environment, other pressing national security concerns, such as climate change, become secondary and in many cases are interpreted only in the context of a grand “great power competition” between the U.S. and China.

The simple narrative of a massive Chinese military-backed threat to the global order will make the work of budgeters, military contractors, and politicians remarkably easy in the short to medium term. But it will not serve American interests in creating a stable foundation for long-term prosperity and order. Overall, this zero-sum narrative, driven by inflated military threat assessments, will greatly undermine those voices within China that favor moderation, significantly raise the danger of Sino–American crises and

military conflict, and divert huge amounts of U.S. resources away from desperately needed nonmilitary uses at home and abroad.

As some analysts have pointed out, Washington needs to recognize that dealing effectively with Beijing as a rising power requires a comprehensive strategy of both positive incentives and disincentives directed at China and a commensurate overall regional and global strategy.<sup>154</sup> Such a strategy would require the coordination and full support of allied nations, a judicious balancing of likely available resources and policy goals, a far more fact-based assessment of the nature and scope of China's military and other threats, support for more integrated and inclusive global economic and technological systems, and significant improvements in America's global economic and political influence. Currently, the U.S. government and the larger Washington policy community are moving in exactly the wrong direction in almost all these areas.

*This zero-sum narrative, driven by inflated military threat assessments, will greatly undermine those voices within China that favor moderation, significantly raise the danger of Sino–American crises and military conflict, and divert huge amounts of U.S. resources away from desperately needed nonmilitary uses at home and abroad.*

Even under existing conditions, the Chinese military threat to U.S. interests does not require a major buildup of U.S. military capabilities and a major leap in U.S. defense spending, as some advocate. One pending, detailed, and highly rigorous analysis of U.S., Japanese, and Chinese military capabilities in the Western Pacific argues that a stable level of deterrence in the region over the medium term (to about 2035) can be attained

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<sup>154</sup> White, Hugh. *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Freeman, Chas. "A New Era in US–China Relations." Remarks at Brown University and Harvard University, November 13–14, 2018. <https://chasfreeman.net/a-new-era-in-us-china-relations/>; Wong, Catherine. "Thucydides Trap author Graham Allison says China and US must work together and not end up on path that leads to war." *South China Morning Post*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2178905/thucydides-trap-author-says-china-and-us-must-work-together-and>.

with only small changes to U.S. defense spending, and a reordering of spending priorities in favor of a less escalatory and more affordable active denial defense posture.<sup>155</sup>

Also, America needs to present a more detailed and convincing argument to its friends and allies to support any effort to coordinate security policies toward China.<sup>156</sup> Many countries depend heavily on strong economic relations with China and (with some exceptions such as the Philippines and Australia) are not as vested as Washington in preventing Chinese pressure on Taiwan or neighbors with which Beijing has disputes.<sup>157</sup> Hence, they are unlikely to endorse American efforts to treat China as a zero-sum adversary embarked on a strategy to subdue the democratic world through economic and military dominance.

Most U.S. friends and partners will continue to support a strong, global American military. However, without clear and palpable Chinese threats, they will not backstop American efforts to confront and undermine Chinese offshore military modernization at every turn. Some states believe, correctly, that the PLA can serve positive functions in some security areas and should be encouraged to do so.<sup>158</sup> If the U.S. is going to leverage the Quad and other Indo–Pacific and global partnerships to contend with China’s growing capabilities more effectively, it will need to present a much less zero-sum and militarized approach.<sup>159</sup> Even Japan continues to hedge by improving relations with Beijing, and India has yet to show convincingly that it is prepared to fully back current U.S. security policies toward China.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Odell, et al. “Active Denial.”

<sup>156</sup> The following four paragraphs are adapted from Swaine. “The PLA Navy’s Strategic Transformation to the ‘Far Seas.’”

<sup>157</sup> CSIS China Power. “Is China the world’s top trader?” CSIS China Power, March 28, 2019.

<https://chinapower.csis.org/trade-partner/>.

<sup>158</sup> Shullman, David. “Protect the Party: China’s growing influence in the developing world.” Brookings Institution, January 22, 2019.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/protect-the-party-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-developing-world/>.

<sup>159</sup> Shidore, Sarang. “The Quad’s Perils Outweigh its Promises.” Responsible Statecraft, September 27, 2021.

<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/27/does-the-quads-perils-outweigh-its-promises/>.

<sup>160</sup> Harris, Tobias. “The Surprising Strength of Chinese–Japanese Ties.” *Foreign Affairs*, May 4, 2021.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-05-04/surprising-strength-chinese-japanese-ties>; Shidore, Sarang. “De-Risking the India Relationship: An action agenda for the United States.” Quincy Brief No. 10, March 10, 2021.

<https://quincyinst.org/report/de-risking-the-india-relationship-an-action-agenda-for-the-united-states/>; Zeeshan, Mohamed. “China Has a Huge Strategic Opening With India.” *The Diplomat*, March 21, 2022.

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/china-has-a-huge-strategic-opening-with->

For its friends and allies, Washington is creating many risks by confronting China in a largely zero-sum manner, while providing none of the benefits required to cause them to support efforts to deter and contain a worst-case view of China's military ambitions. A better policy, one rooted more in facts, would be to treat the current threat-inflation-based, worst-case assumptions only as potential future situations and outcomes to be avoided if at all possible. The best way to do this is to consistently offer more balanced assessments of China's military capabilities and intentions, reduce America's overall global military footprint to focus primarily on Asia (and secondarily on Europe) by decreasing its bases and commitments in other parts of the world, and transition from the unstable military balance that is now emerging in the Western Pacific toward a more stable and in many ways more cooperative balance.<sup>161</sup> Over the short to medium term, the U.S. and its allies would best create such a balance by transitioning toward an active denial force posture in the Asia–Pacific designed to deny China clear control over its maritime periphery without contributing to rapid or severe escalation in a crisis or conflict. This more realistic goal does not require clear U.S. dominance and would be more feasible, less threatening to China, and less dangerous than an effort to revive the United States' eroding military predominance.<sup>162</sup>

Such a U.S. and allied force posture would likely entail greatly improved passive and active defenses on land; a more dispersed pattern of force deployments; greater numbers of anti-ship and anti-air cruise and other missiles; less reliance on large, forward-deployed aircraft carriers; a greater reliance on more limited-range UAVs, submarines, and ASW capabilities; and a greater ability to resupply Guam and more forward areas from Hawaii and CONUS. In a crisis or conflict, these capabilities would focus on interdicting, deterring, or destroying offshore Chinese forces arrayed against Taiwan without striking logistics points and C4ISR locations deep within the Chinese mainland.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Swaine, et al. "Creating a Stable Asia."

<sup>162</sup> Swaine, et al. "Creating a Stable Asia."; Heginbotham, Eric, and Jacob Heim. "Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity." *Washington Quarterly* 38 (1), 2020. 185–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1038189>; Odell, et al. "Active Denial"; Swaine, et al. "Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order."

<sup>163</sup> Heginbotham, Eric, and Jacob Heim. "Why the United States needs an Active Denial Strategy for Asia." The Rand Blog, June 8, 2015. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2015/06/why-the-united-states-needs-an-active-denial-strategy.html>.



Beyond such military moves, this approach will also require significant diplomatic and political initiatives directed at far more than merely strengthening deterrence toward China, including efforts at reassurance and perhaps even mutual accommodation, in consultation with America's allies, in handling potential sources of conflict such as Taiwan.<sup>164</sup> Although the United States is now working to acquire some of these capabilities, it is not doing so to the extent required, nor with a clear recognition of the need to create a stable balance, as opposed to some new form of predominance.

*For its friends and allies, Washington is creating many risks by confronting China in a largely zero-sum manner, while providing none of the benefits required to cause them to support efforts to deter and contain a worst-case view of China's military ambitions.*

In the nuclear arena, greater stability could result from an open acceptance by the United States of the reality of mutual vulnerability to nuclear attack, a willingness to include missile defense limitations in the arms control process, a revival of the past range of Track 2 and 1.5 nuclear dialogues with Beijing, and continued efforts to push China to elevate such dialogues to the Track 1 level.<sup>165</sup> In addition, to enhance its weakened credibility, Washington should indicate its willingness to consider a "sole purpose" declaratory nuclear posture — one that states the U.S. will use nuclear weapons only to deter nuclear attack and not other forms of attack — as well as reciprocal U.S. and Chinese limits to programs designed to develop new types of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. And, under the type of short- to medium-term active denial strategy described above, China would "not be faced with a quick decision between large-scale conventional defeat or limited nuclear use" in a Taiwan conflict.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Swaine, et. al. *Creating a Stable Asia: An Agenda for a U.S.–China Balance of Power*; Odell, et al. "Active Denial."

<sup>165</sup> Odell, et al. "Active Denial."

<sup>166</sup> Castillo, Jasen J. "Deliberate Escalation: Nuclear Strategies to Deter or to Stop Conventional Attacks." *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*. Eds. Greenhill, Kelly M., and Peter Krause. New York. Oxford University Press, 2018. 304–305; Odell, et al. "Active Denial."

Over the medium to long term, on both the global and regional level, the U.S. can and should seek to create understandings with Beijing in the military and other realms based on mutual restraint and (to the degree possible) clear red lines on the direct use of force over disputed maritime or territorial claims such as Taiwan. Neither Washington nor Beijing will benefit from unrestrained, open-ended arms races in a futile search for long-term military primacy; nor will the two powers benefit from vague, undefined statements of interest.

China's highly contingent, competitive, and cooperative approach to relations with the U.S. and the West in general indicates that it is both possible and necessary to seek to shape Chinese policies and goals in this direction, striving for areas of mutual compromise, and providing "off-ramp" opportunities for Beijing to de-escalate from destructive to constructive competition.

This will require Washington to keep the door wide open to peaceful, uncoerced resolutions of any kind to potentially volatile issues such as Taiwan and other sovereignty disputes, strengthen dialogues with Beijing and U.S. friends and allies on the long-term strategic environment (both in Asia and globally), and improve the capacity of all relevant countries to reduce the chances of miscalculation in possible political-military crises between the U.S. and China.

To do this, Washington and policy specialists need to adopt clearly defined, prioritized, and fact-based definitions of the specific threats or clashes of interest that exist between the United States and China, and what would constitute a realistic, attainable resolution or management of such problems. They also need to greatly improve their dialogue on crisis prevention and management.

An optimal long-term security goal for both the United States and China should be to create a regional and global system centered on a maximum level of positive-sum security interactions, including cooperative political, diplomatic, economic, technological, and military security structures and agreements to address specific common regional and global threats, including first and foremost climate change,

followed by pandemics, financial instability, cyberattacks, and WMD proliferation. In Asia, this should also include limited collective security arrangements with U.S. allies and partners, China, and possibly other regional nations to ensure the security of SLOCs, combat terrorism, and resolve local disputes and conflicts.

Such a goal would probably require several sets of supporting activities, including, first, an expanded, overarching U.S. redefinition of national security and well-being that includes a primary focus on addressing common transnational threats over narrow, interstate security competition and arms racing. Avoiding the latter should obviously be an important precondition permitting a focus on the former.

Second, the development of an overall U.S. (and Chinese) mindset that prizes skillful diplomacy over the use of military instruments to deter, pressure, and persuade others, recognizing that the key sources of tensions in East Asia are political, and not solvable by military means. Of course, effective diplomacy in many cases requires reinforcing military policies and force postures, including deterrence measures where necessary. But these should be structured to reduce suspicion and zero-sum security assessments, not simply to threaten the other side should diplomacy prove ineffective.

Third, an end to the use of concepts such as “great power competition” and the struggle between “democracy and authoritarianism” as central framing devices describing the regional (and global) security environment. Similarly, China should stop referring in its public statements to the decline of liberal democracies and the inevitable victory of socialism. These concepts distort reality, deepen the security dilemma, and obstruct efforts to build a long-term foundation for stability and growth in Asia and beyond.

Fourth, detailed, sustained U.S. policy deliberations with key American allies, first, then with other nations (including China), regarding the appropriate types of fora, structures, etc. for developing regional approaches to handling common transnational threats and strengthening cooperative security interactions. This would be a long-term process, also involving both deterrence and reassurance policies toward China, and efforts to counter fears of “abandonment” by Japan.

Fifth, some greater levels of defensively oriented burden sharing by U.S. allies, along with discussions on redefining the purpose of U.S. Asian alliances, to transition from largely one-sided bilateral security pacts based on high levels of U.S. forward presence directed at China and North Korea, to more open and diversified, positive-sum regional security arrangements, CBMs, and a Korea peace regime. That said, the U.S. should not push Japan to abandon its peace constitution or greatly increase defense spending in offensive areas, especially with regard to a Taiwan intervention.

Sixth, with a view toward medium- and long-term policy, the U.S. should conduct an interagency U.S. Taiwan policy review on how to: a) sustain a Chinese commitment to the peaceful handling of the issue, b) reduce the negative military and political dynamics on both sides driving the cross-Strait security competition, and c) increase Taiwanese efforts to take on far more responsibility for deterring a PRC attack on the island. This review should involve extensive consultations with U.S. allies and partners, including Taiwan. As and if U.S.–China relations improve, such a review should consider the modification of existing U.S. policies toward Taiwan, to create an overall environment more conducive to cross-Strait political talks. This could include sustained efforts to encourage Taiwan’s return to a version of the 92 Consensus and Beijing’s modification of the “one country, two systems” formula to make it more attractive to Taiwan.

Seventh, an interagency review of North Korea policy on how best to: a) avoid conflict on the peninsula over the long-term b) prevent the issue from becoming an arena for Sino–U.S. security competition c) increase the overall emphasis placed on diplomacy over military assets in creating long-term stability and peaceful resolution to the Korean War; and d) prevent further nuclearization and proliferation.



Flags of the United States and People's Republic of China at a meeting between U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno and commanders of the People's Liberation Army in Beijing, China, Feb. 21, 2014 (U.S. Army Photo by Sgt. Mikki L. Sprenkle/Released).

Eighth, U.S. (and Chinese) nuclear policies designed to discourage incentives to build nuclear warfighting capabilities, steadily reduce the size of the nuclear arsenals of the existing nuclear powers, and prevent WMD proliferation.

In order to enhance incentives for all these actions, Washington needs to stop portraying China as an existential threat and listen to the more moderate, positive-sum views and interests of its friends and allies. Similarly, Beijing needs to end its efforts to use the notion of “foreign” (read “American”) threats and bullying to garner domestic support. Hostile efforts to simply decouple from or clearly dominate China and destroy its political system, or for China to undermine and dominate the United States, will simply lead to destructive forms of competition that benefit neither side.

Given the extremely ambitious nature of the above U.S. security strategy, one must ask what alternatives exist if such a strategy becomes virtually impossible over time. This

could certainly happen, perhaps because U.S. and/or Chinese leaders resist taking the risks involved in attempting to realize such a strategy in the first place and thereby allow the current trend toward greater distrust and zero-sum reasoning to gradually increase. Under such conditions, and assuming the continued growth of Chinese economic and military power and influence, the desirability of avoiding needless friction with China would be even greater, including the need to avoid taking actions that escalate tensions and increase the likelihood of conflict.

One option might involve a U.S. attempt to double down on strengthening its alliances and forward military presence in Asia in order to reestablish dominance or to create a strong, military- and economic-centered, zero-sum balance against China. Both projected Chinese versus U.S.–Japanese military capabilities and overall likely Chinese economic capabilities in the region suggest that such an approach would be futile and exceedingly dangerous, raising the chances of conflict.

Another option is for Washington to withdraw its forces over the horizon to Guam, Hawaii, and perhaps Australia; end U.S. security assurances to Taiwan; cut those alliances that might not be sustainable in wartime; and back out of regional diplomacy management as much as possible. This would be done in order to (a) give the U.S. a free hand to act only when its interests are truly imperiled, (b) incentivize much-stronger levels of local counterbalancing (with U.S. assistance), and (c) limit the intensity of U.S.–PRC competition to the extent possible, to preserve the possibility of ad hoc cooperation on issues of common interest (e.g., environment, trade).<sup>167</sup>

This option could significantly reduce the chance of a major conflict between Beijing and Washington, but would also pose some serious challenges. These include the possibility that Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan acquire nuclear weapons, and the prospect of heightened tensions or even conflict between Beijing and Tokyo. The latter could occur if China were to view the U.S. withdrawal as an opportunity to achieve control over Taiwan or the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands through military

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<sup>167</sup> The author is indebted to Josh Shiffrin for posing many of these issues.



intimidation or a direct use of force. And of course, such developments could produce unanticipated, adverse shifts outside of the Western Pacific, if countries were to conclude that the U.S. withdrawal signified a larger American loss of credibility and influence.

The best alternative to these two options would be a “responsible restraint” strategy that reduces Washington’s exposure to conflict with China while minimizing any adverse shifts that might result from a more restrained U.S. military and political posture. This might include the lessening or ending of some Asian security alliance relationships (e.g., with Thailand and the Philippines), the revitalization of the One China policy toward Taiwan alongside greater efforts to increase incentives in both Beijing and Taipei to compromise in ways that make possible eventual political talks, greater support for increased defense spending by many Asian states, a continued, robust U.S.–Japan security relationship (but with reductions in the U.S. ground force presence in Japan), and an overall defensive-oriented, denial force posture that minimizes the chances of provocation and inadvertent escalation.<sup>168</sup>

*The United States is not going to build its way out of the current deepening military competition with China, nor develop a successful long-term China strategy based on inflated threats.*

It is possible that an adversarial Beijing would view some of these actions as the weak, desperate moves of a declining U.S. and seek to exploit them in unacceptable ways. The most effective way to reduce the chance of such a reaction (or dilute its effects) is to strengthen the economic and diplomatic foundations of American influence overseas, by revitalizing domestic U.S. capabilities and raising America’s international image, and by reassuring Japan, South Korea, and other Asian nations that the United States will

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<sup>168</sup> These recommendations are presented in greater detail in two forthcoming studies on a Restraint approach to China, and toward Asia, the former by Michael D. Swaine and Andrew Bacevich, and the latter by Michael D. Swaine and Sarang Shidore.

remain in the region as a critical balancing force, postured to reduce the chance of conflict through a judicious balance of reassurance and deterrence. In addition, a responsible restraint strategy would still include strong efforts to strengthen cooperation with Beijing on critical, common security threats, first and foremost climate change, followed by WMD proliferation, global financial upheaval, and pandemics.

Regardless of the prospects for improving or at least stabilizing the security relationship with China, the United States is not going to build its way out of the current deepening military competition with China, nor develop a successful long-term China strategy based on inflated threats. It will need to accept the logic of balance over dominance in many areas, fashion credible strategies designed both to deter and reassure Beijing in both the regional and global arenas, and strengthen its capacities at home. This will demand a fundamental reassessment of current American policies in the light of realistic assessments of both threats and opportunities, real capacities, and reasonable aspirations.

# About the Quincy Institute

The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft is an action-oriented think tank launched in 2019 to promote ideas that move U.S. foreign policy away from endless war and toward vigorous diplomacy in the pursuit of international peace.

QI is committed to improving standards for think tank transparency and potential conflict-of-interest avoidance. QI's conflict-of-interest policy can be viewed at <https://quincyinst.org/coi/>

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