



QUINCY INSTITUTE
FOR RESPONSIBLE
STATECRAFT

The Conventional Wisdom About the Chinese Military Challenge: Incomplete and Unpersuasive

NOVEMBER 2023 | QUINCY BRIEF NO. 48

Steven Kosiak

Non-Resident Fellow

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

Executive Summary and Introduction

Now possessing the world's largest economy and backed up by an increasingly capable military, in recent years China has grown into an ever more significant and complex concern for the United States, its friends and allies, and others in the Indo-Pacific region. It has become not only stronger and more capable but, in a variety of areas, including the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits, more assertive. In this light, it is only prudent that the United States remain engaged in the region and, along with its allies, maintain robust military capabilities.

At the same time, however, it is difficult to understand some of the main features of what has emerged as the conventional wisdom concerning the magnitude, scope and shape of the challenge China represents, particularly in its military dimensions. Among other things, shortcomings in the conventional wisdom include the unsettling degree to which mainstream assessments of the Chinese military challenge have:

- devoted enormous attention to various Taiwan contingencies and, by comparison, remarkably little attention to the Chinese military's capacity – or lack thereof – to directly conquer or coerce any of the major powers in the region;
- equated defending Taiwan, and other relatively small nearby economies, with preventing Chinese regional hegemony, without providing significant analytical support for the presumption;
- argued that Taiwan is defensible, in part because of the vulnerability of seaborne invasion forces to precision-guided munitions, as well as the

difficulties inherent strategies aimed at punishing adversaries into submission (e.g., through bombardment or blockade) – while seeming to ignore the logical inferences of those conclusions for the defensibility of the major powers in the region, which are larger, economically stronger and generally located much farther from China;

- analogized the challenge posed by China today to the threats posed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in World War Two and the Soviet Union during the Cold War in ways that – because of differences in, among other things, geography, technology, nationalism, and China’s role in the global economy (including its great dependence on international trade) – may do more to obscure than illuminate the challenge.

These analytical shortcomings need to be addressed through additional, more rigorous and better focused research and analysis. While clearly needed, however, it seems unlikely that this additional analysis will come close to fully redeeming the conventional wisdom about the Chinese military challenge as articulated today, including the necessity of some key components of the U.S. military’s existing force structure, modernization and other plans. Taken together, the gaps, weaknesses, blind spots, and analytical leaps upon which the conventional wisdom rests appear too pervasive and deep for such to be the case.

Given this reality, rather than the current U.S. strategy, embracing something akin to the Active Denial strategy proposed by a Quincy Institute panel in 2022 would seem to represent a more prudent approach.¹ This strategy embraces some cuts to force structure – especially among ground forces – yielding significant budgetary savings. But it retrains robust air, naval and other forces that would leave the U.S. military with a

¹ Rachel Esplin Odell, Eric Heginbotham, John Culver, Eric Gomez, Brian Killough, Steven Kosiak, Jessica J. Lee, Brad Martin, Mike Mochizuki, and Michael D. Swaine, *Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia*, Quincy Paper No. 8, June 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/>

powerful capacity to deter and, if need be, counter Chinese aggression in the Indo–Pacific and, specifically, to support key U.S. allies and friends in the region. And better addressing the areas noted above could go far towards facilitating the refinement of this more restrained strategy, and ensuring that it is both as effective as possible and can be supported at an affordable and sustainable price.

China as hegemonic challenge

Given the extent to which a stable international environment has facilitated China’s economic growth and prosperity in recent decades, it presumably has a strong interest in avoiding conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. Nevertheless, the dominant view within the U.S. national security community appears to be that China poses a challenge today similar to that posed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan during the Second World War and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Examples of this perspective abound. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark A. Milley, has stated that “China intends to be the regional hegemon in Asia within the next 10 years and to exceed the United States’ overall military capability by midcentury.”² Former Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, has warned that China is “harboring long-term designs to rewrite the existing global order. ... The Ming Dynasty appears to be their model, albeit in a more muscular manner, demanding other nations become tribute states, kowtowing to Beijing.”³ And RAND has published a report, *China’s Quest for Global Primacy*, describing in general terms a possible Chinese strategy focused on this goal.⁴

² Jim Garamone, “Milley Says Investments in Military Programs are Paying Off,” Department of Defense News, May 11, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3393297/milley-says-investments-in-military-capabilities-are-paying-off/>

³ Adam Taylor, Mattis Compared Xi’s China to the Ming Dynasty, Xi Might be Happy to Hear It,” *Washington Post*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/06/20/mattis-compared-xis-china-to-the-ming-dynasty-xi-might-be-happy-to-hear-it/>

⁴ Timothy R. Heath, Derek Grossman, Asha Clark, *China’s Quest for Primacy* (RAND, Santa Monica: 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA447-1.html

Elbridge Colby in his book *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* provides among the most articulate versions of this narrative.⁵ Like Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and the Soviet Union in earlier times, according to Colby and others, China seeks to become a hegemon in a crucial region of the world. And from such a position China would necessarily possess the wherewithal to threaten the United States.

The dominant view within the U.S. national security community appears to be that China poses a challenge today similar to that posed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan during the Second World War and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Colby is also clear that China's potential rise as a regional hegemon is, ultimately, dependent on its military capabilities—as was the case with Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and the Soviet Union during these earlier periods. As Colby puts it, “crucially, China is very unlikely to succeed in attaining regional hegemony if the penalties [of opposing Chinese hegemony] do not include a core military component These military elements need not be the most visible, but Beijing must have recourse to them—and others must know of its ability—for the strategy to be effective Since violence is the most effective form of coercion, were China to threaten solely non-military punishments, it would severely limit and likely vitiate its ability to inflict the necessary harm on the targets.”⁶

For the most part, U.S. concerns about the threats posed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan during the Second World War and the Soviet Union during the Cold War were that, left unchecked, those powers might be able to dominate and largely control the

⁵ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in An Age of Great Power Conflict* (Yale University Press: New Haven & London), 2021.

⁶ Colby, 112-13.

economies of Europe, which during those periods accounted for roughly half the of the global economy, as well as, in the case of Imperial Japan, much of Asia. With such control, these powers would then potentially pose an existential threat to the United States itself, either militarily or economically.

Today, at about 19 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP), China accounts for a significantly larger share of the world's economy than did Germany or Japan before the Second World War, or the Soviet Union during the Cold War.⁷ Moreover, accounting for just under half of the Indo-Pacific's overall GDP, China's current share of that region's economy is roughly comparable to pre-war Japan's. It also is substantially larger than Germany's pre-war share of Europe's GDP or the Soviet Union's share of Europe's economy during the Cold War.⁸

There are some obvious and significant differences between the challenge China poses today and earlier challenges.

Thus, in some ways, China appears to pose at least as great an economic and military challenge to the United States as did these earlier threats. But there are also some obvious and significant differences between the challenge China poses today and those earlier challenges. One of these differences is made apparent by the extent to which the conventional wisdom concerning the Chinese military challenge focuses on an analysis of the potential threat to Taiwan.

⁷ In 2021, China accounted for about 19 percent of global GDP, measured by Purchasing Power Parity. By comparison, Germany (including Austria) accounted for about 9.1 percent of global GDP in 1938 (including Italy would increase the Axis share of global GDP to 12.4 percent, while adding the Japanese Empire would increase the Axis share to around 20 percent) and the Soviet Union accounted for about 9.7 percent of global GDP in the mid-1970s (adding the other Warsaw Pact countries would increase the Soviet Blocks share of global GDP to about 13.5 percent).

⁸ In 2021, the Indo-Pacific region accounted for some 41 percent of the global economy, with China accounting for just under half of the regional share. By comparison, in 1938, Europe accounted for some 45 percent of the global economy, with Germany providing roughly one-fifth of the total (or one-quarter, if Italy is included). In the mid-1970s, Europe accounted for some 40-45 percent of global GDP, with the Soviet Union providing about one-quarter of the regional share (or as much as one-third, if its Warsaw Pact allies are included).

Focus on Taiwan contingencies

Given the concerns that China could pose a serious hegemonic challenge, one might expect that the U.S. national security community would be devoting great attention to the question of whether and how China might be able to use its military power to exert control over the Indo–Pacific region to the point where its economic edge over the United States would be so great as to represent a truly existential threat. In particular, we might expect that the U.S. national security community would be focused on an analysis of whether and how China might realistically be able to defeat major regional powers such as Japan, India, Indonesia, South Korea and Australia. Such a focus seems natural because only through the defeat or coercion of these major regional powers could China gain control of the region’s vast economic resources. Only in this way could China gain control of economic resources comparable in magnitude to those possessed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan during the Second World War – when the former occupied most of Europe and the latter conquered much of East and Southeast Asia, establishing an empire whose constituent parts accounted for some 45 percent of the prewar global economy – or widely thought achievable by the Soviet Union in the event of an invasion of western Europe during the Cold War.

To a remarkable degree, U.S. military, academic and thinktank analysis of the potential threat posed by the Chinese military focuses on what might be considered lesser contingencies.

In fact, there is a dearth of any such analysis. Instead, to a remarkable degree, U.S. military, academic and thinktank analysis of the potential threat posed by the Chinese military focuses on what might be considered lesser contingencies. The most frequently discussed contingency is, of course, a military operation against Taiwan, including possibly an invasion, missile strikes or blockade. The next most commonly discussed contingencies – albeit trailing well behind – are probably Chinese military

operations against the Senkakus Islands, Vietnam, or the Philippines. Chinese control of any, or even all, of these areas – even assuming their resources could be relatively effectively absorbed – would only very modestly increase China’s economic potential. Today, Taiwan accounts for about one percent of global GDP, while Vietnam’s share is about 0.7 percent and the Philippines about 0.8 percent.

These shares closely resemble not the economies of major powers like Britain, France, Italy and Russia at the outset of World Wars One and Two, or Britain, France, West Germany and Italy during the Cold War, but rather the economies of relatively minor countries. Control of these three countries – accounting for a combined total of 2.5 percent of global GDP – would represent, at best, a very modest boost to China’s economic power, increasing the share of global economic resources under its control from about 19 percent to 21.5 percent. This is far less than the economic resources Germany controlled at its peak in World War II, let alone those conquered and controlled by the Axis as a whole in that war. It is also far less than the level of resources Soviet leaders might have hoped to have attained through an invasion of Western Europe.

Of course, this kind of simple economic number–crunching cannot fully capture the potential consequences that such a successful series of conquests by the Chinese military might trigger. Colby, for example, argues that the loss of Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines would likely ensure the eventual establishment of Chinese hegemony in the Indo–Pacific. According to Colby, “If the United States and other potential defenders had not already established a powerful defensive architecture to negate this strategy, Beijing could seize the key territory of one or more of these states and present the anti–hegemonic coalition with such a powerful defensive position that it would be difficult to reverse China’s gains.” This, in turn, would cause “any remaining actors – for instance, Japan, India and Australia – [to] no longer view the anti–hegemonic coalition as a reliable counterweight to Beijing. Those states’ incentives to join or remain in the

anti-hegemonic coalition would decline as a result, ceding to Beijing the mantle of regional hegemony.”⁹

But unless it can be shown that the loss of these relatively minor states situated near China would critically undermine the capacity of other key powers in the region – powers with in many cases much larger economies and located at far greater distances – to defend themselves from Chinese military aggression, it is difficult to accept the inevitability of such a collapse. This is perhaps especially true given how many of these countries – including Japan, South Korea and Australia – are U.S. allies. Indeed, absent such an impact on the defensibility of these regional powers, it seems at least as likely that this kind of sequential aggression would strengthen the resolve of those powers to balance and counter China.

Unless it can be shown that the loss of relatively minor states situated near China would critically undermine the capacity of other key powers in the region to defend themselves from Chinese military aggression, it is difficult to accept the inevitability of such a collapse.

Colby argues that “were China to seize Taiwan, it could also make use of the island as a launching point for subsequent attacks on other members of the anti-hegemonial coalition – the Taiwan Cork would have been removed.”¹⁰ But aside from noting that the occupation of Taiwan would “provide Beijing with additional bases both for denying other states access into the Western Pacific and East Asia and projecting power beyond the first island chain,”¹¹ he spends essentially no time discussing in any detail exactly how, in military terms, he believes the loss of Taiwan, Vietnam or the Philippines would

⁹ Colby, 146.

¹⁰ Colby, 146.

¹¹ Colby, 116.

undermine the ability of U.S. allies like Japan, Australia, and South Korea, or other major powers like India or Indonesia to be effectively defended.

Colby's failure to make this argument is not unique. Aside from noting the obvious advantages of control of the First Island Chain as a means of containing potential Chinese military adventurism, remarkably little rigorous analytical effort has gone into actually describing in detail how – and how significantly – the loss of one or more of these minor powers would undermine the defensibility of other key medium and major powers in the region. So much of the national security community's analytical bandwidth has been absorbed by various Taiwan scenarios and other contingencies involving modest powers in the region that little has been available to consider other larger, more consequential contingencies, including the capacity of the Chinese military to conquer or coerce major U.S. allies and other regional powers.

Little rigorous analytical effort has gone into actually describing in detail how the loss of one or more of these minor powers would undermine the defensibility of other key medium and major powers in the region.

A partial exception to the general lack of analytical focus on the credibility of the broader Chinese military challenge is an analysis by Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan."¹² The authors note – in a welcome, if understated way – that "the idea that control of the island [Taiwan] itself could affect the military balance has not yet received a systematic, rigorous assessment." They go on to argue that the loss of Taiwan would make the task of defending the Senkakus and, by implication, Japan's main islands

¹² Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *International Security*, 47 (1), Summer 2022, 7-45, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/47/1/7/112577/Then-What-Assessing-the-Military-Implications-of?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

substantially more difficult. However, while this study makes a very useful and commendable contribution to the discussion of the Chinese military challenge, its scope is limited and it comes nowhere near fully answering some of the key questions Western military analysts need to address.¹³

These efforts should start with the question of whether and, if so, how China might realistically be able to use its military power to conquer or coerce the major powers of the region – which, including Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, and Indonesia, account for some 15.7 percent of global GDP, and more than two-thirds of the Indo-Pacific region’s economy outside of China.¹⁴ The question of how China might realistically be able to use its military power to conquer or coerce relatively minor regional powers – such as Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines – also needs to be examined. But this is a secondary issue. And it needs to be examined foremost as it relates to the first question. If it is doubtful that China can militarily coerce the major powers of the region – whether or not it controls one or more of these minor states – the United States might still decide that it can and should help defend these minor states. But it would not be compelled to do so from any realistic perspective of national security. Only if the loss of one or more of these minor states to Chinese coercion could realistically be expected to critically undermine the defensibility of major powers in the region, might their defense become a strategic imperative for the United States.

¹³ This comment is not meant as criticism of the article by Green and Talmadge, but rather simply an admonition that much more analysis needs to be done on this topic if it is to be adequately addressed.

¹⁴ By comparison, even if China were able to conquer or coerce along with Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam and all of the other countries of the Southeast Asian mainland, plus Singapore, it would add a total of only about 5.5 percent of global GDP to its control.

Only if the loss of one or more of these minor states to Chinese coercion could realistically be expected to critically undermine the defensibility of major powers in the region, might their defense become a strategic imperative for the United States.

Equally important, is consideration of the other side of the coin. Are there cases where the attempt to defend a minor state in the region might ultimately undermine our ability to effectively defend much more critical major powers in the region? For example, if our goal is to defend Japan and other major friends and allies in the region, is Taiwan or a First Island Chain that no longer includes Taiwan the best place to draw the line? As the study by Green and Talmadge argues, a compelling case can be made that the loss of Taiwan would make the task of containing the Chinese Air Force and, particularly, the Chinese Navy considerably more difficult. But just how much more difficult would the defense of Japan be? And what would be the likely impact on the defensibility of other major powers in the Indo-Pacific? Moreover, whatever the impact, if committing the U.S. military to the defense of Taiwan — located just 100 miles off of mainland China where the PLA's capabilities are greatest — puts key U.S. forces at risk of destruction, a strategy focused on defending the remainder of the First Island Chain might nevertheless be more prudent and effective.¹⁵

The current paucity of detailed, rigorous and systematic analysis of the Chinese military's capacity to threaten other major powers in the Indo-Pacific is made all the more unsettling by the fact that — on the face of it — the Chinese military appears to face so many challenges to the effective use of force against most of the other major powers in the region.

¹⁵ As Colby puts it “whether including a state as an ally improves on balance, the coalition’s ability to deny China’s pursuit of regional hegemony *is not just about the benefits that the state would bring to the coalition. It is also about the costs and risks . . .*” (emphasis added), Colby, 69.

Geography, technology, and nationalism in the Indo-Pacific

While the Indo–Pacific today is roughly comparable to Europe during the 20th century in terms of its relative economic importance, it is composed of a far vaster area, with much of the economic power of the region outside of China separated from that country by seas and ocean often measured in distances of hundreds or even thousands of miles. And a strong case can be made that advances in technology have greatly increased the difficulty – if not, at least in some cases, essentially eliminated the possibility entirely – of invasion and physical occupation as a plausible means for China to pursue military conquest in at least the distant essentially maritime areas of the region. Among other things, this stems from advances in conventional precision–strike capabilities, and the special vulnerability of sea-based invasion forces to such precision–guided strikes. Certainly, taken together, these technological changes, along with the replacement of weak and shallow colonial regimes in the region with more powerful, strongly nationalist ones, makes the situation facing China in today’s Indo–Pacific radically different from that which Japan was able to exploit during its period of rapid conquest in late 1941 and early 1942.¹⁶

The situation facing China in today’s Indo–Pacific is radically different from that which Japan was able to exploit during its period of rapid conquest in late 1941 and early 1942.

The proliferation of more effective surveillance and targeting systems, combined with long–range precision–guided munitions (PGMs), and other modern technologies, has

¹⁶ The Japanese conquests in Southeast Asia were made largely at the expense of the weak Vichy colonial government in Indochina, which permitted the occupation of the colony by the Japanese, against a British government which, reeling from Nazi Germany’s victories in Europe, could not effectively support its colonies in Malaysia, Singapore and Burma (Myanmar), and against a weak Dutch colonial regime in Indonesia whose home territory had been defeated and occupied by Germany.

dramatically increased the vulnerability of surface warships. These developments have, of course, raised great concern even about the survivability of U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups operating on the open ocean many hundreds of miles from an adversary's coastline. But perhaps no mission has become more difficult to carry out against a PGM-armed adversary than seaborne invasions.¹⁷ This conclusion has been confirmed by no less of an authority than Gen. David Berger, the recently retired former Commandant of the Marine Corps. In 2020 testimony, he stated that large-scale amphibious invasions "are problematic even in the case of the lesser rogue regime threats."¹⁸ But, according to Gen. Berger, such operations simply "could not be carried out in the face of an adversary that has integrated the technologies and disciplines of the mature precision strike regime. . . . the days of massed naval armadas nine miles offshore from some contested feature are long over."¹⁹ This strongly suggests that major maritime powers in the Indo-Pacific could defeat any large-scale attempt by the Chinese military to launch a seaborne invasion, especially if supported by the U.S. military's own anti-access and area denial capabilities. And such U.S. capabilities would remain extremely robust even under a more restrained and affordable U.S. approach, such as the Active Denial Strategy proposed by the Quincy Institute panel.²⁰

¹⁷ For a brief discussion of the difficulties associated with a potential Chinese seaborne invasion in which the U.S. military provides defensive support, see Rachel Esplin Odell, Eric Heginbotham, John Oliver, Eric Gomez, Brian Killough, Steven Kosiak, Jessica Lee, Brad Martin, Mike Mochizuki, and Michael Swaine, *Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing and Sustainable U.S. Strategy for Asia*, Quincy Paper No. 8, June 2022, 81, <https://quincyst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/#:~:text=Key%20components%20of%20an%20active,preparing%20for%20focused%20counterattack%20I%20ater.>

¹⁸ Michael O'Hanlon, "The Questionable Future of Amphibious Assault," Brookings Commentary, June 23, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-questionable-future-of-amphibious-assault/>

¹⁹ O'Hanlon, Brookings Commentary

²⁰ The U.S. military would also, of course, retain the capacity to use nuclear weapons against a Chinese seaborne invasion force. The threshold for such use could be lower than in some other cases. The use of nuclear weapons at sea might cause far less collateral damage than a nuclear attack on ground forces moving through populated areas (let alone a strike on the Chinese homeland). In addition, the arguably disproportionate nature of the issues at stake—Chinese military conquest of a distant country versus the last-ditch defense of a U.S. allied country's sovereignty—might further tamp down (though certainly not eliminate) concerns about the escalatory risks associated with such use. There is also, of course, the possibility that over the medium-to-long term one or more major countries in the Western Pacific could — for a variety of reasons — decide to acquire their own nuclear forces, potentially adding to the credibility of such use and its deterrent effect (albeit, while potentially also increasing the risks of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation). However, given the likely robustness of an anti-access capability organized around conventional PGMs and the great vulnerability of seaborne invasion forces to such a capability, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the defense of a major maritime power in the Indo-Pacific region would necessitate the use of nuclear weapons.

Perhaps no mission has become more difficult to carry out against a Precision Guided Munition (PGM)–armed adversary than seaborne invasions.

If the defensive and deterrent effect of PGMs makes the invasion and physical occupation of at least the major maritime powers in the Western Pacific region by China implausible, are there nevertheless other means of military coercion against these countries that a rising China might effectively employ? As Colby points out, the alternative to conquest is punishment. Thus, rather than attempting to invade and occupy these countries (conquest), China could attempt to coerce them through the imposition of costs on a state sufficient to convince its leadership to capitulate on its own accord.²¹ Most obviously, such a punishment strategy might include the use of strikes against military, economic and other targets in the country and a blockade aimed at strangling the country's economy.

However, history suggests that, while punishment strategies can sometimes be effective when used in support of “a main effort to conquer and subordinate a state directly,” such strategies – as Colby for one acknowledges – rarely succeed on their own.²² Among other things, this is because the target of coercion often has greater interest in the territory at stake and is willing to absorb high costs to protect it, nationalism magnifies a target state's valuation of the territory, and a punitive campaign is more likely to foster a targeted society's hostility toward the compeller than opposition to its own government.²³ Moreover, as Colby notes, “states with strong traditions of independence, such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and India, could be expected to require an exceptionally high level of punishment to subordinate.”²⁴

It is also worth noting that a major war in the Western Pacific would likely pose a serious danger to the Chinese economy as well. Like other countries in the region, that

²¹ Colby, 120.

²² Colby, 130.

²³ Colby, 123-24.

²⁴ Colby, 126.

economy is hugely dependent on seaborne trade. And as a RAND study has pointed out, this trade could suffer greatly from a war in the region, even if the U.S. military did not use its military forces expressly to threaten Chinese commercial shipping.²⁵ Indeed, according to RAND, the damage done to the Chinese economy could rival or even surpass the damage done to the German and Japanese economies during World War II.

26

A major war in the Western Pacific would likely pose a serious danger to the Chinese economy.

Another notion implicit in the conventional wisdom about the possible use of military force by China that needs more rigorous analysis concerns the ability of even a “victorious” China to effectively control and meaningfully benefit from the economic potential of any countries it was able to militarily defeat. Even if such conquest or coercion could somehow be accomplished without causing great destruction and loss to a target country’s economy, the history of the past century, or even the past several decades, hardly suggests that converting military conquest into economic power is an easy task. And presumably especially not in the case of “states with strong traditions of independence.”²⁷

Analytical double standards

Perhaps ironically, some of the most convincing evidence suggesting the great difficulties blocking China’s path to military conquest beyond its relatively minor neighbors comes from the analyses of those advocating the need to and feasibility of defending those neighbors – and Taiwan in particular. Given the fact that most

²⁵ David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Cristina L. Garafolapp, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* (RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2016), pp. 41-48, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1140.html

²⁶ Gompert, et al, RAND, 48.

²⁷ Of course, military conquest or coercion by China would presumably at least remove the ability of the target country to contribute its economic resources to a counter-hegemonic coalition. On the other hand, given China’s dependence on international trade, a conquered but weakened neighboring economy could result in a net loss to China’s own economy.

open-source analysis suggests that Taiwan – a relatively small (in terms of population, wealth and size) island lying roughly 100 miles off the coast of mainland China – would, at least with assistance from the U.S. military, likely be able to defeat an attempted seaborne invasion by China, it is difficult to imagine realistic scenarios where Chinese sea-borne invasions might succeed against, comparably assisted, much larger and wealthier countries in the Western Pacific located many hundreds or thousands of miles from China.

It is difficult to credit the Chinese military with a serious capability to effectively conduct punishment operations against major U.S. allies like Japan and Australia and other major powers in the region.

Similarly, most open–source analysis suggests that Taiwan, if properly supported by the militaries of the United States and other countries, could survive a punishment campaign focused on bombardment and blockade. As Colby himself concludes, “the punishment approach is likely to fail for China, *even against a target as favorable as Taiwan*” (emphasis added).²⁸ As such, here too it is difficult to credit the Chinese military with a serious capability to effectively conduct such operations against major U.S. allies like Japan and Australia and other major powers in the region, like Indonesia, that are located at far greater distances from China.

India

Of course, not all of the major powers in the Indo-Pacific region that might, in theory, fall prey to Chinese military aggression are relatively distant maritime powers. Most obviously, India shares a long land border with China. However, the conventional

²⁸ Colby, 129.

wisdom about the military challenge China poses does not, in fact, appear to rate the Chinese military challenge to India as especially serious. As Colby explains,

[India] has built one of the world's most formidable militaries, including developing a nuclear arsenal that is likely capable of surviving an attempted disarming first strike by China. Further, although India shares a long land border with China, its key territories, such as cities like Delhi and Mumbai, are located far from the border. Because of these factors, India is almost certainly capable of effectively defending its key territory against Beijing. It is therefore unlikely that the United States will need to offer, or that India will seek, an alliance . . . between Washington and New Delhi.²⁹

This seems like a realistic conclusion. And it may explain why relatively little analytical attention within the U.S. national security community is focused on a potential conflict between India and China. However, it also suggests another rather glaring disconnect within the conventional wisdom about the challenge posed by the Chinese military. India is by far the greatest potential counterweight to China in the region. India already has the second largest economy in the Indo-Pacific. And by some estimates its economy is projected to grow from about seven percent of global GDP today to 15 percent of global GDP by 2050, at which point India's economy would be roughly three-quarter the size of China's economy.³⁰ If China's ability to use its military power to coerce India is, indeed, severely limited, it becomes far more difficult to imagine a realistic scenario in which China is able to use its military power to establish regional hegemony.

²⁹ Colby, 246.

³⁰ PwC, *The Long View: How Will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050*, February 2017, 4, <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/world-2050/assets/pwc-world-in-2050-summary-report-feb-2017.pdf>

If China's ability to use its military power to coerce India is severely limited, it becomes far more difficult to imagine a realistic scenario in which China is able to use its military power to establish regional hegemony.

Chinese political and economic influence

Some might argue that this paper focuses overly much on questions concerning the Chinese military's capacity to directly conquer and coerce other major powers in the region, while ignoring forms of political and economic domination it could achieve by leveraging its military capabilities less directly. But nothing in this paper argues that military capability need necessarily be exercised to be effective. It only argues that such a capability must pose a credible threat to serve as an effective instrument of coercion. In other words, as Colby notes, "others must know of its [the Chinese military's] ability – for the strategy to be effective" ³¹ In addition, such a capability very clearly underwrote concerns about the military challenges posed by Germany and Japan during World War II and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Hence, this paper focuses on questions concerning the credibility of Chinese military challenge, especially as it relates to the threat posed to other major powers in the region.

To be sure, absent such a capacity, China can still wield great influence in the Indo–Pacific region. Indeed, accounting for 19 percent of global GDP, and roughly half of the region's economy, China is – by definition – certain to wield significant economic and political influence in the Indo–Pacific region. But, to once again quote Colby, "The United States' own record of economic coercion against much weaker states counsels us to be skeptical that Beijing could use such coercion alone to compel states to forfeit their mostly dearly held goods" ³² Moreover, to the extent that the economic—rather

³¹ Colby, 112.

³² Colby, 113.

than military—realm becomes the key focus of competition, proposed solutions focused on military options for countering China are likely to be deemed ever less relevant and cost-effective compared to, for example, efforts to bolster U.S. economic growth through deficit reduction (to free up private-sector investment) or greater investment in infrastructure and education.

A military capability must pose a credible threat to serve as an effective instrument of coercion.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, the primary goal of this paper has been to point out some serious analytical shortcomings in what has emerged as the U.S. national security community's conventional wisdom concerning the challenge posed by the Chinese military and its ability to establish hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. It is not the author's contention that none of these shortcomings can be addressed through further deeper and more comprehensive analysis. Indeed, this paper is in part a call for such analyses. Among other things, this additional work might include detailed studies concerning:

- The feasibility of the Chinese military defeating major regional powers, such as Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, or Indonesia, using assumptions about the impact of PGMs, blockades and bombardment similar to those assumed for a Taiwan scenario.
- The impact of the loss of Taiwan on the defense of Japan and other major powers in the region.
- The relative risks to U.S. and allied forces associated with attempting to defend Taiwan, compared to defending at greater distances from China, and the

implications of these findings for a U.S. strategy focused on the defense of major allies in the region.

- Similar questions focused on other relatively minor countries located relatively near China, including the Philippines and Vietnam.
- China's ability to cost-effectively reap economic rewards from military conquests – even if such conquest can be achieved – in the face of the strongly nationalist character of the major economic powers in the region.

While these questions merit further serious research and analysis, it seems unlikely that such additional work will come close to fully redeeming the conventional wisdom about the Chinese military challenge as articulated today, including the necessity of some key components of the U.S. military's existing force structure, modernization and other plans. Taken together, the gaps, weaknesses, blind spots, and analytical leaps upon which the conventional wisdom rests appear too pervasive and deep for such to be the case. As Stephen Walt has noted, "regional hegemony may be desirable in theory, but history suggests that it is an elusive goal."³³ Given this reality, rather than the current U.S. strategy, embracing something akin to the Active Denial strategy proposed by a Quincy Institute panel in 2022 would seem to represent a more prudent approach. And better addressing the questions noted above could go far towards facilitating the refinement of this more restrained strategy, and ensuring that it is both as effective as possible and can be supported at an affordable and sustainable price.

³³ Stephen M. Walt, Stop Worrying About Chinese Hegemony in Asia, *Foreign Policy*, May 31, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/31/stop-worrying-about-chinese-hegemony-in-asia/>

The situation of Taiwan is far too complicated to be treated as a simple binary choice for U.S. policymakers and strategists – defend the island at all costs and under all circumstances, or abandon it to China.

The situation of Taiwan is far too complicated to be treated as a simple binary choice for U.S. policymakers and strategists – defend the island at all costs and under all circumstances, or abandon it to China. And, as with other relatively minor countries in the Indo–Pacific region, whether and if so how the United States should respond to potential Chinese aggression cannot be boiled down to a simple question of whether the country’s independence is critical to preventing the emergence of China as a regional hegemon. Even if it is true, as suggested in this paper, that – at least given even a relatively restrained U.S. engagement in the region – China is unlikely to be able to effectively use military force to become a regional hegemon, it could, nevertheless be motivated to use military force to advance other, lesser objectives. This might, perhaps most obviously, include aggression against Taiwan for reasons of incremental economic expansion, ideology, nationalism, or other considerations, or simple miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. Likewise, there may be situations in which, while not necessarily critical to preventing the emergence of Chinese hegemony, the defense of Taiwan or other minor countries in the region, or at least active assistance short of direct military support, may represent a prudent choice.

Decisions about where, when and how to respond to the challenge posed by China, and particularly its military capabilities, should rest on a clear and dispassionate understanding of that challenge built on thorough and rigorous analysis.

However, decisions about where, when and how to respond to the challenge posed by China, and particularly its military capabilities, should rest on a clear and dispassionate understanding of that challenge built on thorough and rigorous analysis. And as cataloged in this paper, in too many important areas and along too many critical dimensions, such analysis is currently lacking. Assessments of the Chinese military challenge should, as noted earlier in this paper, start with the question of whether and how China might realistically be able to use its military capabilities to conquer or coerce the major powers of the region. The secondary question of how China might realistically be able to use its military power to effectively conquer or coerce relatively minor regional powers – such as Taiwan – also needs to be examined. But it needs to be examined foremost as it relates to the first question. And at present the conventional wisdom’s answer to the first question seems to rest more on assertion and assumption, than rigorous analysis.

About the Author

Steven Kosiak is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Quincy Institute and a nationally-recognized expert on the US defense and international affairs budgets, with extensive experience in national security planning and budgeting. Presently, he was a partner with ISM Strategies, a Washington, DC based consulting firm that provides high-value counsel, expert assessments and other strategic support to a range of clients working in the defense and international affairs fields. Areas of expertise include the federal budget process, especially within the Executive Branch, and the national security planning and budgeting processes within the Executive Office of the President, as well as the programs and budgets of the Department of Defense, and the Department of State and other international affairs Agencies. Mr. Kosiak is also an adjunct faculty member at American University's School of International Service (SIS).

About the Quincy Institute

QUINCY BRIEFS are produced by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a nonpartisan, action-oriented think tank founded in 2019 to promote ideas to move U.S. foreign policy away from endless war and toward vigorous diplomacy in the pursuit of international peace. © 2022 by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. All rights reserved.

QI is committed to improving the standards for think tank transparency and potential conflict-of-interest avoidance. QI's conflict-of-interest policy can be viewed at quincyinst.org/coi and its list of donors is at quincyinst.org/about.

CONTACT: Jessica Rosenblum
Director of Communications
Email: rosenblum@quincyinst.org
Tel: 202 800 4662