

A CONVENTIONAL
FLEXIBLE RESPONSE
STRATEGY FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC

National Security Perspective



Brendan Cooley | James Scouras

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Abstract

Because of profound uncertainties about the extent of China's rise and the nature of its future relationship with the United States, the United States needs a grand strategy that simultaneously hedges against the spectrum of plausible alternative futures while making the more worrisome futures less probable. Moreover, the conflict over competing national interests in the Western Pacific is currently being waged in the prewar phases of conflict known in military parlance as shaping and deterrence. However, whereas China is focused on winning the conflict in these phases, the US military strategy is more singularly focused on deterring a shooting war and preparing to fight and win one should deterrence fail. As a consequence, the US military hedge may be overemphasized while a shaping strategy is lacking. A conventional flexible response strategy might provide comparable deterrent value at the high end of the spectrum of conflict and be better able to manage confrontations at the low end, while nudging China toward integration into the current global order rather than revisionism.

After the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, US strategic planners shifted their focus to preparations for potential conflicts with “rogue states,” yet they still worried about the potential emergence of “peer competitors” and the threats such states’ economic and military power might pose to US national security and the US-led global order.¹ Some two decades later, it is now apparent that China’s economic and military growth trajectories make it the most likely candidate to become a peer competitor to the United States in the first half of the twenty-first century.²

Three decades of rapid growth in China have led to renewed economic power and global status and a relationship with the world’s remaining superpower—the United States—that is both cooperative and competitive. The US and Chinese economies are the world’s largest and have become deeply interdependent, but the two powers increasingly view the other as the source of their primary security challenges.³ This dichotomous relationship is thus both an engine of global economic growth and a source of volatility and uncertainty in twenty-first-century international relations.

China’s monetary, trade, and industrial policies are all sources of friction in US–Chinese relations. China also consistently voices its displeasure with US fiscal

policy.⁴ However, the integration between the US and Chinese economies has created a mutual dependence between the two Pacific powers, and both share an interest in a globalizing and stable world economy.

In contrast to this mixed record of cooperation and disagreement in the economic realm, US–Chinese security relations can only be characterized as contentious. China has demonstrated increasingly assertive behavior toward states on its periphery and has increasingly voiced opposition to US actions in the Western Pacific that it views as antithetical to its interests.⁵ Perhaps most important, China believes the US alliance network in Asia is part of a larger containment strategy targeting China. Meanwhile, the United States has undertaken a “rebalancing” of the Asia-Pacific region that, while ostensibly not targeting China, aims to increase the US military presence on China’s periphery.⁶ South China Sea and East China Sea island disputes, Korean relations, international maritime norms, and Taiwan’s status are all issues that cause friction in US–Chinese relations and could potentially lead to armed conflict.

From China’s perspective, US power is the primary impediment to resolving these security issues favorably.⁷ The US military is all that stands in the way of successful intimidation of Taiwan and, if necessary, amphibious assault. Also, while the US Navy currently acts as guarantor of freedom of navigation in nonterritorial waters in the Near Seas and Far Seas, that same Navy holds the power to

¹ Eric S. Edelman, “The Strange Career of the 1993 Defense Planning Guidance,” in *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 63–77.

² James Dobbins, David C. Gompert, David A. Shlapak, and Andrew Scobell, *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011), http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP344.html.

³ For data on economic output, see World Bank, “World Development Indicators, GDP (Current US\$),” <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>. For the sources of US–Chinese mutual suspicion, see Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, March 30, 2012), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/03/30-us-china-lieberthal>.

⁴ Wayne M. Morrison, *China-U.S. Trade Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, September 2011), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33536.pdf>.

⁵ David Shambaugh, “Coping with a Conflicted China,” *Washington Quarterly*, 34, no. 1 (2010): 7–27.

⁶ Mark E. Manyin, Stephen Daggett, Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, Michael F. Martin, Ronald O’Rourke, and Bruce Vaughn, *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s ‘Rebalancing’ Toward Asia* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 2012), www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf.

⁷ Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2012): 32–47.

throttle the lifelines of the Chinese economy should a major war erupt between the two powers.

To thwart US military power, China has developed a series of “counter-intervention” capabilities known in the United States as antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD).⁸ These capabilities—including fifth-generation fighters, attack submarines, antisatellite weapons, antiship missiles, and land-attack missiles—threaten the US military’s ability to operate on China’s periphery.⁹ The US Navy has dominated the global maritime commons since the end of World War II and has used this dominance to shape events across oceans and to fight and deter conflict.¹⁰ China’s A2/AD capabilities threaten to erode US dominance of the maritime commons in the Western Pacific and call into question the historical US shaping role.

Through intimidation and by raising questions about US resolve, such capabilities could also contribute to weakening US relationships with regional states as well as resolving territorial and normative disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea in China’s favor. US law and precedent have created a quasi commitment to the defense of Taiwan from aggression or coercion.¹¹ In addition, the United States has formal alliances with Japan, the Philippines, and

South Korea, all of which fall within range of Chinese A2/AD capabilities.

In the wake of these developments, a vigorous debate has emerged among scholars and policy makers regarding what China’s newfound status and capability means for global politics and how the United States should respond. An ideal East Asia will maintain a system of open trade and finance, will not break into war or degenerate into combative camps, and will not host a regional hegemon. We hold that an ideal US strategy will prioritize adhering to these grand strategic goals as it strives to resolve the operational challenges raised by Chinese A2/AD military capabilities.

The following two sections of this paper articulate grand strategic and military strategic imperatives. We use these frameworks to argue that the United States should adopt a more diversified and flexible military strategy for the Western Pacific. While resolving the operational challenges posed by A2/AD capabilities should remain an imperative of US defense planning, planners should more carefully consider the impact of counter-A2/AD investments on Chinese threat perceptions and identify lower-order capabilities that may also contribute to deterrence and warfighting in the region. Our proposed strategy will provide for a more stable deterrent relationship by matching potential Chinese aggression with a proportional response while simultaneously making cooperation between the United States and China more likely by clarifying US intentions and assuaging Chinese threat perceptions.

Ambiguous Futures and Grand Strategic Imperatives

China’s potential rise to peer or near-peer status raises fundamental questions about the coming international system and the type of grand strategy the United States should pursue within that system. During the Cold War, US grand strategy was primarily

⁸ *The Economist*, “The Dragon’s New Teeth: A Rare Look Inside the World’s Biggest Military Expansion,” April 7, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>.

⁹ Andrew Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, February 2010), <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2010/02/why-airsea-battle/>.

¹⁰ Abraham Denmark and James Mulvenon, “Contested Commons: The Future of American Power in a Multipolar World,” in *Contested Commons: The Future of American Power in a Multipolar World* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, January 2010), http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS%20Contested%20Commons_1.pdf.

¹¹ Kerry Dumbaugh, *Taiwan-U.S. Relations: Developments and Policy Implications* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, November 2, 2009), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40493.pdf>.

motivated by a single international actor—the Soviet Union. The Cold War was both an ideological struggle and a power struggle, and the containment strategy designed to confront the Soviet Union guided major US strategic decisions.

Some analysts and scholars have posited that a “Cold War 2.0” between the United States and China is possible, but many important differences exist between China today and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.¹² First, although the Cold War included an intense ideological struggle, the United States and China lack such fundamental differences in ideology and share interests in a functioning and stable global economy. Second, the Soviet Union was an expansionist state attempting to dominate the Eurasian landmass. China currently appears to hold no such grand territorial ambitions. Finally, US–Chinese economic integration has created a dependency whose abrupt dismantlement would result in what some have dubbed “mutually-assured economic destruction.”¹³ For all these reasons, we need a different analytical lens through which to analyze the coming US–Chinese relationship.

We posit that the answers to two macro questions will largely determine the type of relationship that emerges:

- (1) As China’s power grows, will it become a revisionist power bent on overthrowing the current world order, or will it tend toward integration with current global rules and norms?
- (2) Will China’s comprehensive national power eclipse that of the United States, or will its relative growth slow, allowing the United States to remain the most powerful state in the world?

¹² Aaron Friedberg, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (2005): 7–45.

¹³ Dobbins et al., *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence*.

Both of these questions are subject to robust debate, and their answers have important implications for the type of strategy the United States should pursue vis-à-vis China. The first question divides some “realists”—who generally argue that rising Chinese power will inevitably create a US–Chinese competition for primacy, with a significant chance for armed conflict—and “liberals”—who argue that a powerful China can coexist in a primarily cooperative relationship with the United States within the existing international system.¹⁴

The second question divides “bulls” and “bears” on China’s growth prospects.¹⁵ The bulls argue that China’s economic fundamentals are strong, that its government is likely to undertake reforms necessary to maintain growth, and that it possesses massive economic potential. The bears agree that China has this potential but contend that the country’s political system, demographics, and internal contradictions will prevent it from realizing this potential.

The possible answers to these questions yield four broad “futures,” shown in the matrix in Table 1. These futures are constructions used to guide analysis, not predictions of the course of bilateral relations. In addition, these two questions and four futures are not meant to exclude the many other important questions and factors driving US–Chinese relations. Finally, our two questions are not particularly precise. They are questions of degree, allowing futures to exist between the extremes we identify. However, the answers to these two questions do provide a broad picture of the various types of strategic environments the United States could plausibly confront in the coming years.

¹⁴ For a realist perspective, see John J. Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010): 381–96. For a liberal perspective, see G. John. Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23–37.

¹⁵ For one example, see Derek Scissors and Arvind Subramanian, “The Great China Debate: Will Beijing Rule the World?” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 1 (2012): 173–77.

The first future, which we call “Belligerent Behemoths,” characterizes the relationship between the United States and a revisionist China whose power eventually eclipses that of the United States, either due to the stagnation of the American economy and retrenchment of the American military or the sustained higher level of growth of the Chinese economy and the continued development of the China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA). From the American perspective, this is the worst-case scenario. China’s peripheral states—including US allies Japan, South Korea, and Australia—could either balance strongly against China’s new power, increasing defense budgets and welcoming US presence, or become increasingly “Finlandized,” falling into Beijing’s sphere of influence. Whichever combination of balancing and bandwagoning strategies by regional states occurs, the region would likely become more polarized. Military tensions would increase, although these tensions could be countered by strengthened deterrent relationships. Finally, the likelihood of the conflict spilling over into the economic realm would also increase, damaging or destroying the profitable trade relationship that currently exists between the two powers.

Table 1. Alternative US–Chinese Futures

	Revisionist China	Integrative China
Chinese power eclipses US power	Belligerent Behemoths	Beijing-led G-2
United States remains the most powerful state	Sustained Preeminence	Washington-led G-2

The second future, titled “Sustained Preeminence,” would occur if US–Chinese relations soured but China failed to realize its economic potential. Although not optimal, this future presents an opportunity for the United States to ensure that the influence of a still-powerful revisionist China is contained. Even if growth slows significantly in China, the nation is still likely to remain the world’s second-largest economy

and second-most powerful state for a significant period of time. Additionally, its military capabilities are likely to continue to develop, presenting further challenges for the United States. However, the United States would be aided by a strengthened and possibly diversified alliance network in the region. Weak growth prospects in China, combined with the threats posed by China’s proximate and potentially disruptive power, would almost certainly push many regional states to strengthen ties with the United States.¹⁶ This scenario holds a similar risk of open warfare or economic warfare as Belligerent Behemoths, but the resolution of such conflicts would likely be more favorable to the United States.

Although US–Chinese relations could deteriorate along these lines, cooperative futures also exist. In our first cooperative future, “Beijing-led G-2,” the United States and China work together to uphold a global order, but such an order increasingly favors the policy preferences of China.¹⁷ Under this construction, China would become a leader in the global system, although such a system would not necessarily be antithetical to US interests. The United States would retain significant influence, and its most basic interests—in free trade, open finance, and global stability—would be protected. Moreover, Beijing would assume economic and military system-policing costs absorbed by the United States since the end of World War II. The United States and China would become partners in global governance. Such a future would likely be preceded by significant economic and political reforms in China.¹⁸

The final future, a “Washington-led G-2,” is most similar to the status quo. China’s relative growth continues but slows, allowing the United States to

¹⁶ Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 3–43.

¹⁷ The term G-2 was coined by economist C. Fred Bergsten in 2005. See C. Fred Bergsten, *The United States and the World Economy* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute, 2005).

¹⁸ Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West.”

retain its position of dominance. China would be integrated into the current US-led global system, adhering to US-established economic norms and cooperating and contributing to US-led efforts to provide global security. Although some accommodation to Chinese policy preferences would be necessary, the United States would remain the ultimate arbiter in global politics. Of our four futures, this is most conducive to US interests.

These are rough and imperfect sketches of alternative futures of US–Chinese relations. They ignore many important questions regarding the trajectories of both countries and do not account for the influence of other potentially powerful states. Additionally, they ignore the possibility of a significant Chinese economic contraction and other black swan events. While these types of factors could certainly influence the type of future that emerges, they are more difficult to predict and thus beyond the scope of this analysis. Nonetheless, our spectrum is extremely wide.

Although scholars and analysts of different theoretical stripes advance the likelihood of a single scenario at the expense of others, the future of US–Chinese relations is ultimately unpredictable. In the face of this strategic ambiguity, the United States must develop a military hedge that deters a host of potential conflicts and prepares to fight and win wars that occur, while maintaining the ability to shape the regional security environment and avoid unnecessary souring of US–Chinese relations. This is fundamentally a question of balance.

Deterrence and Escalation Control Imperatives

Although the United States must be cognizant of the impact of its military strategy on the course of US–Chinese relations, its strategy must still deter potential Chinese aggression and coercion, provide credible retaliatory options, and prevent unwanted escalation. Both the nature of China’s challenge to US

power and interests and the innate characteristics of the Asia-Pacific region make developing deterrence doctrine for the region different than developing Cold War deterrence doctrine. US doctrine then was predominantly focused on deterring a Soviet ground force invasion of Europe in the Cold War; by contrast, China presents a variety of deterrence challenges. Although the United States has been chiefly concerned with the potential for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and has used this scenario to motivate development of doctrine and capabilities, a host of other deterrence challenges exist in the Western Pacific.¹⁹ In particular, the United States wants to prevent changes to the status of island chains in the South China Sea and East China Sea by force or under the threat of force, protect international maritime norms, safeguard allies and partners from military intimidation from China, maintain stability on the Korean peninsula, and protect its own bases and forces in the region.

Meeting these challenges requires a variety of capabilities. Deterring an invasion of Taiwan requires a robust set of capabilities to deny China’s use of the Taiwan Strait, cripple its command and control networks, and intercept significant portions of incoming missiles and fighters. Likewise, serious threats to US bases and forces require the ability to impose commensurate damage to Chinese forces. However, deterring naval harassment and attempts to take control of small island outcroppings requires different capabilities to maintain deterrence while preventing escalation. Near Seas scenarios have been given increasing attention by defense policy makers as a potential source of conflict, but the United States has not yet attached a set of capabilities to its regional strategy designed to maintain the territorial and normative status quo in these regions.

¹⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2013* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, 2013), http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2013_china_report_final.pdf.

Moreover, deterrence is made more complicated by the asymmetries of stakes that exist in many possible conflicts with China. US responses must be credible reactions to provocations if they are to be effective deterrents, but these asymmetries call into question US credibility. In most potential conflicts over Taiwan or in the Near Seas, China's leaders and its people would have a much larger stake in their outcome than the leaders and people of the United States.²⁰ And if China doubts US resolve in these potential conflicts, it will be more likely to use force.

Consequently, the United States must carefully match its doctrine and capabilities to the types of incursions it expects to encounter in the region. Just as the threat to use nuclear weapons early in a limited conflict lacks credibility, the threat to launch missile strikes on the Chinese mainland in response to a limited armed conflict over the Senkaku Islands is also not credible. If the United States lacks the capabilities to respond proportionally to low-level Chinese incursions, China may be more likely to challenge US resolve. And a challenge would present US leaders with an undesirable choice: ceding the issue in question to the Chinese or escalating the conflict. Tailored capabilities prevent these undesirable scenarios by providing the United States with a set of credible responses.²¹

²⁰ Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG614.html>.

²¹ Kilgour and Zagare analyze the relationship between threat credibility and deterrent stability and find “no linear or other simple relationship between the costs of warfare and deterrence stability. In fact, [their] model indicates that in core areas, where both players have inherently credible threats, increasing the costs of mutual punishment past a certain point does little to enhance deterrence stability. And if there is, as we suspect, an inverse relationship between these costs and threat credibility, then increasing the costs of war at this level makes deterrence less likely, not more likely.” See Marc D. Kilgour and Frank C. Zagare, “Credibility, Uncertainty, and Deterrence,” *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 2 (1991): 305–334.

Escalatory strategies are particularly undesirable in potential conflicts with China because of difficulties in achieving full escalation dominance. The proliferation of conflict domains and the rapid development of Chinese capabilities have presented China with an array of potential avenues for escalation—in space, cyberspace, or, should it feel existentially threatened, in the nuclear realm. Although China's military and civilian leaders profess a no-first-use policy regarding nuclear weapons, Chinese military planners are still debating whether conventional strikes on nuclear silos or early-warning systems should fall under the no-first-use umbrella.²² Chinese early-warning systems might be inadvertently included in a target set, and China's leaders may confuse such a strike as a precursor to a nuclear volley, provoking a nuclear counterstrike.²³ Some Chinese military leaders have even called for the use of nuclear weapons to respond to any conventional strike on the Chinese mainland.²⁴ Focusing specifically on this threat, Keir Lieber and Daryl Press write, “Devising concepts for winning wars without triggering adversary escalation should be a top priority for US conventional war planners; fashioning a conventional and nuclear force structure that is well suited for deterring adversary wartime escalation should be a top priority for US force structure planners.”²⁵

²² Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*.

²³ For a detailed discussion on how the employment of the AirSea concept might lead to nuclear war, see Joshua Rovner, “Three Paths to Nuclear Escalation with China,” *National Interest*, July 18, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/three-paths-nuclear-escalation-china-7216?page=1>.

²⁴ For one example, see the comments of Maj. Gen. Zhu Chenghu in Joseph Kahn, “Chinese General Threatens Use of A-Bombs if U.S. Intrudes,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/15/international/asia/15china.html?_r=1.

²⁵ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *Coercive Nuclear Campaigns in the 21st Century: Understanding Adversary Incentives and Options for Nuclear Escalation*, Report No. 2013-001 (Monterey: Center on Contemporary Conflict, Naval Postgraduate School, March 2013), 41.

In short, to maintain deterrence and prevent unwanted escalation, the US military must be able to respond to a variety of Chinese provocations. US military strategy for the region should be flexible—prepared for a host of potential challenges and scalable to the type of challenge presented. These capabilities will enhance US credibility and help preserve a stable US–Chinese deterrent relationship.

The US Military Response

The Pentagon has been paying particular attention to sizing its strategic hedge vis-à-vis China in recent years.²⁶ In the context of a broad and growing national concern about a rising China, it has devised operational concepts designed to counter A2/AD threats. In particular, the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) and its corollary AirSea Battle Concept propose to overcome these A2/AD capabilities by disrupting an enemy's command and control systems, destroying enemy weapons launchers, and intercepting weapons launched by the enemy, among other initiatives.²⁷

Were the concept to work as articulated in the JOAC, the AirSea Battle Concept could solve some of the operational problems posed by A2/AD capabilities. Although US forces and bases could still suffer heavy losses at the outset of a conflict, the concept could eventually enable US surface ships to enter previously denied areas by striking at PLA command

and control nodes and missile sites.²⁸ The ability to conduct these strikes provides a form of high-level conventional deterrence, potentially preventing the most egregious of Chinese provocations. Additionally, by reviving some of the US military's operational autonomy in the Pacific, allies' confidence in US ability to defend them would increase should war come.

AirSea Battle was developed to address the specific operational challenges posed by A2/AD and is meant to deter and fight the highest orders of conventional conflict in the Western Pacific. As is consistently emphasized by the Department of Defense, it is not a strategy.²⁹ However, because the United States has not articulated a comprehensive Western Pacific strategy, AirSea Battle is viewed by China as a primary contribution to such a strategy. Chinese writings on AirSea Battle assume that it is part of a larger strategy whose primary target is China and use it to justify further investment in A2/AD capabilities.³⁰ The United States possesses many capabilities applicable to lower-order conflicts but has yet to attach them to a larger defense strategy. This strategic communications failure, in addition to confusing the American public, might also convince China that the United States foresees a worsening US–Chinese relationship.

As a result, emphasizing AirSea Battle without better articulating a comprehensive Western Pacific strategy may make the realization of our cooperative scenarios less likely. While China's increasing power already is and will continue to create tension in China's

²⁶ *The Economist*, "The China Syndrome: AirSea Battle Is Now the Pentagon's Priority, but It Has Its Critics," June 9, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21556587>.

²⁷ Adm. Jonathan Greenert and Gen. Mark Welsh, "Breaking the Kill Chain," *Foreign Policy*, May 17, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/05/17/breaking-the-kill-chain/>. For a study on how an AirSea Battle Concept might be used against China, see Jan van Tol, Mark Gunzinger, Andrew F. Krepinevich, and Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/>.

²⁸ van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle*.

²⁹ Capt. Philip Dupree and Col. Jordan Thomas, "Air-Sea Battle: Clearing the Fog," *Armed Forces Journal*, May 1, 2012, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/air-sea-battle-clearing-the-fog/>.

³⁰ Peter W. Mackenzie and Ian M. Easton, "Chinese Views of the Air-Sea Battle Concept: A Preliminary Assessment," in *CNA Maritime Asia Project, Workshop Two: Naval Developments in Asia*, eds. Michael A. McDevitt and Catherine K. Lea (Arlington: CNA, August 2012), 115–125, <https://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/DCP-2012-U-002417-Final.pdf>.

relationship with the United States, these tensions can exist while both sides recognize the benefits of cooperation and the costs of general warfare and thus devise defense policies compatible with preservation of the status quo.³¹ Without greater clarity as to how AirSea Battle fits into a larger US regional strategy, its offensive capabilities will likely heighten Chinese insecurity, leading to increased Chinese defense spending and more points of tension that could serve to undermine the gains from cooperation that both the United States and China currently enjoy.

Heightened Chinese insecurity may in turn set off an arms race that would harm the United States under our combative scenarios. Controlling the commons, especially maritime commons far from US shores, is expensive, whereas adversaries' attempts to deny the United States access to the commons are comparatively inexpensive, as demonstrated by China's emerging A2/AD capabilities.³² The United States will continue to face this structural disadvantage in its strategic planning vis-à-vis China. With the relative trajectories of the US and Chinese economies, the relative strength of their interests in the region, and the advantages derived from geographical proximity, the United States would be ill positioned to compete in an A2/AD versus counter-A2/AD arms race in the Western Pacific. Should China's economy continue to grow relative to the US economy, as postulated in our Belligerent Behemoths future, this arms race would be difficult to win.

³¹ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.

³² For a discussion on how China's A2/AD capabilities impact US freedom of action, see Andrew Erickson, *Through the Lens of Distance: Understanding and Responding to China's "Ripples of Capability,"* Changing Military Dynamics in East Asia Policy Brief 10 (La Jolla: University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, January 2012), <http://igcc.ucsd.edu/assets/001/502847.pdf>. For a discussion of the cost problem, see Robert Haddick, "This Week at War: Can the Navy and the Air Force Get Along?" *Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/24/this_week_at_war_can_the_navy_and_the_air_force_get_along.

Additionally, from a military strategic perspective, although the concept enhances deterrence at the highest levels of possible conventional warfare, it does little to dissuade China from instigating lower-level conflicts and, without supplemental capabilities, could force US decision makers to choose between rapidly escalating a conflict and abandoning US interests at stake in response to Chinese aggression. AirSea Battle would enable the United States to assist in the defense of Taiwan under an invasion scenario, and it would protect US credibility among its allies by giving it the ability to create the conditions necessary to intervene in regional wars. However, the capabilities called for under the doctrine do little to deter lower-level conflicts and could lead to rapid escalation if employed.

A more flexible set of capabilities might prove better at protecting cooperative relations while simultaneously providing more complete and stable deterrent ability should a more openly hostile relationship arise. We thus argue that AirSea Battle should be supplemented and integrated into a larger strategy that emphasizes proportional responses to potential Chinese incursions and that it should be communicated clearly to both China and the American public. The contours of such a strategy are discussed in the following section.

Reviving Flexible Response

A set of ambiguous geopolitical futures and a wide range of potential conflict scenarios necessitate the development of a flexible defense strategy for the Asia-Pacific. AirSea Battle capabilities would be maintained under our proposed strategy, which we call "conventional flexible response." However, these capabilities would be supplemented by lower-order capabilities designed to achieve escalation control through the ability to counter a range of potential Chinese incursions with proportional responses.

Beyond deterrence, by preparing for a broader swath of potential conflicts, such a strategy could decrease the likelihood of a US–Chinese arms race and be more likely to preserve the cooperative elements of the US–Chinese relationship. This conclusion is based on the observation that foreign powers partially ascertain US intentions by examining US military investment patterns. Military investment consequently serves as a signal of US interests and perceptions. By emphasizing high-end capabilities, we argue that the United States is signaling that it foresees a worsening bilateral relationship and a higher likelihood for general war. A more flexible doctrine may signal a more nuanced view of the future security environment—one more likely to assuage Chinese concerns about US rebalancing in the Western Pacific.

Perhaps the largest military challenge facing the United States during the Cold War was deterring a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. The conventional balance of forces in the theater favored the Soviet Union for the entirety of the Cold War, and the United States faced the prospect of losing a significant portion of Western Europe to the Soviet Union if it did not employ nuclear weapons on behalf of its European allies.³³ Because of the importance placed on protecting Western European allies, the United States maintained the threat of a nuclear strike to deter Soviet aggression. However, as the Soviet Union attained a credible second-strike capability, this threat rapidly lost credibility. The US deterrent strategy was then based on convincing the Soviet Union that it would sacrifice American cities to protect its European allies—more simply, that the United States would act against its own interests in a crisis.

³³ John C. Collins, *U.S.-Soviet Military Balance: Concepts and Capabilities, 1960–1980* (New York: Aviation Week, 1980); and John C. Collins, *U.S.-Soviet Military Balance, 1980–1985* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985).

Recognizing this problem of credibility, the Kennedy administration attempted to bolster conventional deterrence in Europe by shifting from a strategy of massive retaliation to one of flexible response.³⁴ Although the threat of a nuclear strike was not lifted, the United States attempted to enhance its regional conventional forces so that it did not need to immediately escalate to nuclear warfare. As the balance of conventional forces in Europe improved, some prominent US strategists even proposed declaring a no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons.³⁵ Others argued that such a policy would erode strategic stability by changing the Soviet strategic calculus on the costs of aggression in Europe.³⁶ The emergence of this debate, however, is evidence that the flexible response doctrine and the policy changes that accompanied it created an added layer of deterrence and thus enhanced US credibility in Europe.

Our conventional flexible response strategy aims to similarly enhance US credibility in the Western Pacific. In doing so, it seeks to supplement the high-end capabilities called for in the AirSea Battle Concept with lower-end capabilities that would provide more credible and less escalatory options to senior US decision makers in crises. Although many capabilities could provide these options, we highlight three potential areas for investment: regional bases with local A2/AD systems, distant blockade of China, and low-intensity operations in contested waters.

Local A2/AD Systems

In our concept, local A2/AD networks would be the bulwark of US denial-based deterrence of potential

³⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (United Kingdom and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

³⁵ McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard C. Smith, “Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs* 60, no. 4 (1982): 753–768.

³⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, “Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe,” *International Security* 9, no. 3 (1984): 19–46.

Chinese aggression. Rather than relentlessly pursuing unfettered access to these commons at any cost, the United States and its allies must instead ensure that they possess the same asymmetric capabilities as China and can deny the PLA access to the maritime and aerospace commons it threatens.³⁷ A2/AD capabilities threaten US surface ships within the first island chain, and US attempts to defend these assets will be quickly made obsolete by increasingly capable Chinese missiles.³⁸ Additionally, advanced Chinese air defenses and the ability to hold major US air bases in Guam and Okinawa at risk through heavy missile barrages will make air-based power projection less effective.³⁹ These constraints require the US military to shift to undersea power projection and support its allies to further develop their own local A2/AD capabilities to threaten PLA Navy (PLAN) assets in contested waters and PLA Air Force assets in contested airspace.

Distant Blockade

Distant blockade provides a scalable and more credible form of punishment-based deterrence vis-à-vis China. Although usually conceived of as a blunt instrument useful only in total war, a more selective blockade could be useful in deterring escalation. The ability to implement such a blockade could be demonstrated during low- to medium-intensity conflict by simply positioning naval assets in key chokepoints or conducting maritime interdiction operations to “inspect” Chinese cargoes. These

operations could demonstrate US resolve without unduly escalating the conflict. Also, if the blockade were implemented, its impact is almost immediately reversible. This advantage will limit retaliatory impulses in China and opens up opportunities for de-escalation.

As demonstrated in Hu Jintao’s “Malacca Dilemma” speech, Chinese strategists believe that the United States has the ability to impose such a blockade, and a blockade’s impact on China—particularly its oil markets—would be costly. China is not particularly dependent on oil for its overall energy supply, but oil has few substitutes as a transport fuel, so any disruption in these markets would have a disproportionate impact on the Chinese economy.⁴⁰

A distant blockade would be established at strategic chokepoints in the Indonesian archipelago, around Australia, and in North and South America. These locations would be immune from the most accurate and threatening Chinese A2/AD capabilities.

The PLAN would not be able to disrupt a blockade with its current force structure, but the United States would nonetheless be faced with a series of logistical challenges in implementing a distant blockade.⁴¹ First, any blockade could not simply close key chokepoints, as doing so would be detrimental to the economies of US allies in the region and the US economy itself. US forces would distinguish between cargoes bound for China and those bound for US allies and partners and then track some of those ships to ensure compliance. Additionally, the United States would avoid extensive use of a traditional blockade tactic—sinking commercial shipping—as such actions could cause environmental damage, have international

³⁷ For two other conceptions of potential US area denial strategies, see Douglas C. Peifer, “China, the German Analogy, and the New AirSea Operational Concept,” *Orbis* 55, no. 1 (2011): 114–131, and T. X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy,” *Infinity* 2, no. 2 (2012): 10–14.

³⁸ Erickson, *Through the Lens of Distance*.

³⁹ Barry D. Watts, *The Case for Long-Range Strike: 21st Century Scenarios* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2008), <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2008/12/the-case-for-long-range-strike-21st-century-scenarios/>.

⁴⁰ Andrew Erickson and Lyle Goldstein, “Gunboats for China’s New ‘Grand Canals’? Probing the Intersection of Beijing’s Naval and Oil Security Policies,” *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 2 (2009): 43–76.

⁴¹ Gabriel B. Collins and William S. Murray, “No Oil for the Lamps of China?” *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 2 (2008): 79–95.

political ramifications, and provide justifications for Chinese horizontal escalation.

Collins and Murray point to potential problems in maintaining ships on station, stopping incompliant ships, and ensuring compliance past checkpoints and conclude that a distant blockade is infeasible.⁴² However, the technological and operational fixes needed to confront these challenges pale in comparison to the challenges of projecting power into a sophisticated and dense A2/AD umbrella.

American analysts debate the feasibility of a distant blockade. T. X. Hammes made it the central tenet of his “offshore control” warfighting strategy against China,⁴³ but Collins and Murray doubt a distant blockade’s operational effectiveness. Sean Mirski also raises numerous political challenges that would limit the US ability to choke China’s oil imports.⁴⁴ We believe operational challenges would be resolvable at relatively low cost to the United States and that the United States would retain advantages over China in attracting the partners necessary to implement such a blockade.

Low-Intensity Operations

Low-intensity operations enhance deterrence by providing the capabilities necessary to symmetrically respond to small incursions, particularly those in contested waters. The United States needs a way to respond to potentially violent naval skirmishes in the Near Seas between the PLAN and the navies of Japan and the Philippines. US credibility rests on the defense of these allies, and territorial disputes over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are

flashpoints that have ignited in the past. Although neither side has a large enough interest in the islands to intentionally induce a war, smaller conflicts over the islands, particularly in a tense, geopolitical environment, could serve as a spark leading to unintended escalation.⁴⁵ The United States might be called on to fulfill its treaty obligations to Japan and the Philippines in the aftermath of a low-intensity territorial conflict. In this case, US actions against China must be symmetric but would satisfy allies’ calls for support.

The US military should thus develop capabilities to disable, disrupt, and confuse PLAN assets. These capabilities could then be deployed in hypothetical standoffs over Near Seas island chains to achieve limited objectives while controlling the potential for escalation. One such example could include an unmanned undersea vehicle (UUV) launching a device designed to disable the propeller of a PLAN vessel.

The most important advantage of the conventional flexible response strategy is its shaping impact. Taken together, these capabilities are more defensive and thus less threatening to China than current US defense posture and plans for the region, which are unclear and thus breed suspicion. They preserve deterrence while making it less likely that the United States and China begin to slide into our combative futures.

AirSea Battle’s primary objective—to maintain US freedom of action in the Western Pacific—is defensive. However, its proposed strikes on A2/AD capabilities are inherently offensive. Consequently, AirSea Battle by itself is likely to undermine China’s perception of its security. Nevertheless, we recognize

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Hammes, “Offshore Control;” and Collins and Murray, “No Oil for the Lamps of China?”

⁴⁴ Sean A. Mirski, “Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013): 385–421.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of these concerns, see Rory Medcalf, Raoul Heinrichs, and Justin Jones, *Crisis and Confidence: Major Powers and Maritime Security in Indo-Pacific Asia* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2011), <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/crisis-and-confidence-major-powers-and-maritime-security-indo-pacific-asia>.

the need to protect US freedom of action in the Western Pacific and to strike threatening Chinese assets. We argue, though, that articulating a holistic strategy of flexible response, under which AirSea Battle is but one part, will work to reassure China of US intentions. The capabilities called for under our strategy are more defensive in nature and designed for lower orders of conflict. By better communicating benign intentions, the United States will be able to better avoid unnecessary arms races and encourage cooperative futures. Should our combative scenarios arise regardless, the strategy retains a strong and stable high-end deterrent.

Additionally, by providing the US military with a more comprehensive set of capabilities, the strategy provides for deterrence under a larger spectrum of potential conflict scenarios and works to control escalatory incentives should conflict emerge. Capabilities such as blockade are scalable and less escalatory than strikes at China's command and control networks. Developing these capabilities in concert with AirSea Battle capabilities and organizing US doctrine around a range of potential conflict scenarios will ensure US credibility in these scenarios, as well as provide better options for conflict de-escalation. Although we recognize that China will retain the ability to escalate potential conflicts horizontally, our concept puts the impetus for escalation on China rather than on the United States. A fuller range of capabilities will allow the United States to avoid the unappealing choice of escalating a conflict with a formidable adversary or capitulating.

Conclusion: Reconciling Grand Strategy with Operational Imperatives

The grand strategic problem posed by China's rapid rise merits the development of a true grand strategy—one that balances the risks of Chinese aggression against the potential for mutual economic gain and also balances the need to deter aggression and

coercion against the need to shape political outcomes. We applied a top-down approach to this problem, first recognizing that the future of US–Chinese relations is largely unpredictable but that we can still imagine potential futures. Because of the mix of combative and cooperative elements of this relationship, the spectrum of potential outcomes is broad. Rather than simply preparing for the worst-case scenario, US military strategy should be adaptable to each of these scenarios and, when possible, refrain from actions that preclude cooperation.

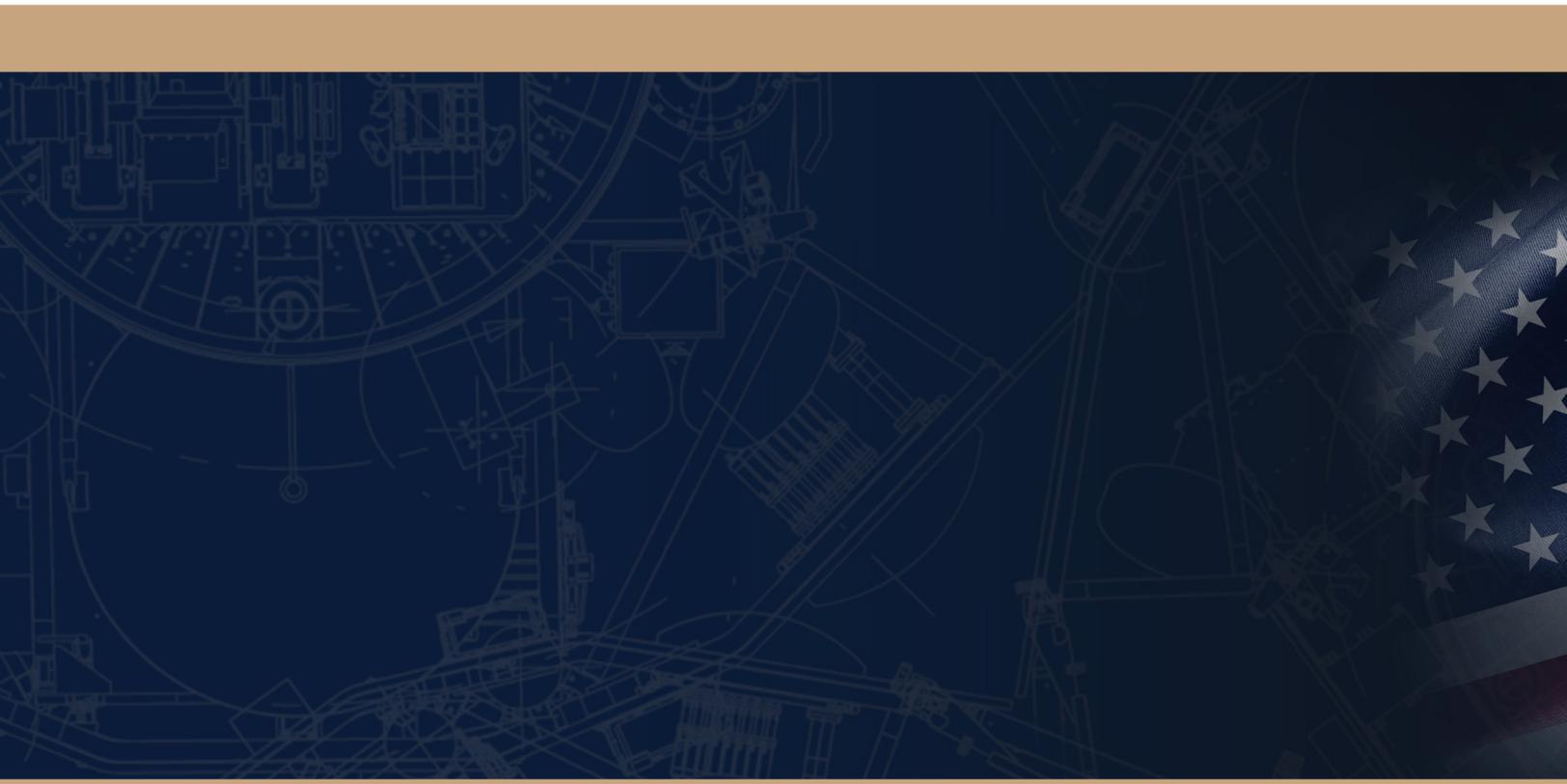
The inability of the US defense establishment to effectively communicate the AirSea Battle Concept's place in a larger US defense strategy could encourage an arms race detrimental to US interests or serve to preclude mutually beneficial economic cooperation. Additionally, AirSea Battle's emergence reflects a focus on capabilities designed to fight high-level conflict that neglects consideration and development of lower-order capabilities that would provide the United States with a stronger deterrent and escalation control.

We advocate a conventional flexible response strategy that would supplement AirSea Battle capabilities with lower-order capabilities. This shift would provide a scalable response to US decision makers and enhance peacetime and in-crisis stability. Simultaneously, by demonstrating that the United States is not solely concerned with preparing for the worst outcomes in US–Chinese relations, such a strategy—articulated well—would not unnecessarily undermine the prospects for a cooperative future.

Our futures paradigm and the strategic approach derived from it emphasize the need for balance in setting US policy for the Western Pacific and for directing military technological investment. Striking this balance in military strategy will allow the United States to better shape political outcomes in an uncertain world while still preparing it to fight and deter the worst of foreseeable conflicts.

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