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14. ABSTRACT The United States has operational shortfalls in the Indo-Pacific, creating a significant disadvantage if competition with China trends to conflict. The shortfalls exist in both capacity, as U.S. shipbuilding has failed to keep pace with Chinese production leading to a lack of numerical parity, and capability as China has exceeded U.S capabilities in range for maritime weapon systems. China has demonstrated vulnerability related to its geographic position in relation to middle-powers in the Indo-Pacific, undersea operations and susceptibility for non-attributional irregular warfare. This paper explores the potential of utilizing relational maneuver, a concept forwarded by Edward Luttwak to exploit enemy vulnerabilities, in peacetime operations during great power competition. The paper will explain the potential of exploiting China's vulnerabilities in geographic position related to middle powers, undersea operations and irregular warfare. This these makes recommendations to the Department of Defense's budgetary process for individual service components with the intent to use U.S. Navy funding, while decreasing U.S. Army funding, over the next decade to strengthen national security and the international rules based order.				
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Introduction

Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan cautioned against utilizing the navy as a means of power projection by stating, “as a rule major operation of war across the sea should not be attempted, unless naval superiority for an adequate period is probable.”¹ The maritime environment of the 21st century, shaped by the rise of great power competition between the U.S. and China, challenges this warning. The U.S. Navy serves as a global force, requiring it to be near omnipresent, limiting its ability to maintain naval superiority in an expeditionary manner, especially in areas where Chinese maritime forces are active.²

Further complicating the situation is the inadequacy of the U.S. shipbuilding industry and the slowness of defense acquisition. Once among the world leaders, U.S. shipbuilders are incapable of generating the necessary capacity of oceangoing commercial vessels. The U.S. builds less than ten vessels per year, short of the 1000 Chinese vessels produced in the same timeframe.³ The shipbuilding capacity of military shipyards is even direr, with production speeds no better than moderate, and too few manufacturers willing to enter the industry.⁴

The inadequacy of U.S. maritime capacity and capability limits the potential success of attrition in potential conflicts with China. Attritive warfare applies strength against strength, resulting in the need to achieve superiority through the acquisition and procurement of new equipment.⁵ Chinese numerical superiority is projected to continue for the foreseeable future, which makes it critical for the U.S. to position itself in a manner that allows it to respond

¹ Milan Vego. “Naval Classical Thinkers and Operational Art.” *U.S. Naval War College*. (2009), 4.

² Loren Thompson. “U.S. Shipbuilding Is At its Lowest Ebb Ever. How Did America Fall So Far?” *Forbes*. July 23, 2021.

³ Thompson, “U.S. Shipbuilding.”

⁴ David Axe. “The U.S. Navy Has a Big Shipyard Problem.” *The National Interest*. July 31, 2021.

⁵ Edward Luttwak. “The Operational Level of War.” *International Security* Volume 5, Number 3. (Winter 1980-81): 67.

effectively if competition trends to conflict in the Indo-Pacific, while avoiding accelerating the trend.

The concept of relational maneuver provides a construct for the disruption and incapacitation of an enemy by focusing on its weakest aspects and relying on flexible and versatile organizations and equipment in the current inventory.⁶ China presents a daunting opponent, but not one that is invulnerable. China has exploitable vulnerabilities in its geographic position in relation to middle powers, undersea operations, and the irregular warfare environment. The U.S. should employ the concepts of relational maneuver to exploit these vulnerabilities in the peacetime environment to overcome operational shortfalls in capacity and capability in great power competition with China. First, the U.S. should maximize partnerships and coalitions in the Indo-Pacific region to exploit the proximity of middle-powers to China's operations. Second, the U.S. should concentrate its military efforts in conjunction with these partnerships and coalitions at the operational level on irregular warfare to maintain a global forward presence. Finally, the U.S. should focus efforts on the production and positioning of submarines in the Indo-Pacific to take advantage of its existing asymmetric advantage over China.

An Overview of Relational Maneuver

Relational maneuver stands as a counter to attrition on the spectrum of war. Instead of a focus on destruction, the process can be described more as systemic disruption. Where attrition is at its core strength versus strength, relational maneuver avoids the enemy's strength and directs selective strength against a known enemy weakness. This may require a modest application of

⁶ Edward Luttwak. "Attrition, Relational Maneuver, and the Military Balance." *International Security* Volume 8, Number 2 (Fall 1983): 177.

attrition against the weaker aspects, but it avoids a decisive engagement.⁷ These aspects of relational maneuver make it ideal for the side that finds itself in a resource disadvantage, like the current U.S. position in the maritime as it relates to China.

In combat, relational maneuver is vulnerable to catastrophic failure due to the requirement of a deep understanding of the enemy's strengths. Peacetime provides an ideal environment for the study of the enemy's physical, psychological, and organizational weaknesses, while testing disruptive strategies with little risk of operational failure. It allows for the resource disadvantaged, to reconfigure its own capabilities to focus relevant strengths against the identified weaknesses.⁸ In the case of China, the application of relational maneuver allows the U.S. to posture itself in a manner that reduces the advantages created by the pace of Chinese maritime expansion, while preventing escalation.

Indo-Pacific Partnerships and Coalitions

One of China's potential weaknesses is its geographic position as it relates to middle-powers in the Indo-Pacific. Currently, middle-power countries are not aligned in a manner that could influence China to operate within the bounds of the rules-based international order. This has been demonstrated through China's coercive behavior against Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan, which has created alarm regarding the security environment. Generally speaking, states within the Indo-Pacific are too weak to counter a great power on their own, which provides an opportunity for the U.S. to support a coalition to exploit potential weaknesses for China in the region.

A primary method of establishing this coalition and exploiting this potential weakness is through military training exercises. The continued expansion of joint and combined operations

⁷ Luttwak, "Operational Level," 66-68.

⁸ Luttwak, "Attrition," 176-179.

with potential coalition partners increases China's risk and cost of having overseas bases and deployed forces. Moreover, China's reliance on the Persian Gulf for energy (half or more of its supply) requires the uninterrupted passage of energy providers.⁹ A coalition of regional partners changes the calculus by providing a viable threat to China's economic lifelines in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The coalition also sends a clear signal to China that aggression could be met with a significant response.

U.S. efforts to counter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific must be centered on the presence of middle powers in close geographic proximity to China. A coalition of India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore, or some combination thereof, can affect the regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and deter future Chinese aggression. The objective should be to create informal arrangements where regional states cooperate through open security dialogue, intelligence exchange, military capacity building, and technology sharing activities.¹⁰ The U.S. Navy is uniquely postured to assist in this coalition-building effort through its traditional diplomatic capability and its ability to conduct combined operations routinely. The objective would be to create a credible risk to China's far-seas fleet, forward-deployed forces, and sea lines of communication.¹¹

The U.S. will need to adapt from its traditional role as the leader of such coalitions. Therefore, it will require a robust and regional middle-power to take the lead in vulnerability exploitation. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's distinct Indo-Pacific itinerary and nuclear capability, India presents the likeliest leader. The coalition would be less susceptible to Chinese

⁹ Michael O'Hanlon. "An Asymmetric Defense of Taiwan." *Brookings*. April 28, 2021.

¹⁰ Rory Medcalf and C. Raja Mohan. "The U.S.-China Rivalry Has Asia On Edge: Can 'Middle Powers' Create Stability?" *Brookings*. August 15, 2014.

¹¹ Liu Zhen. "US Should Seize on China's Big Weaknesses to Curb Its Global Ambitions, Washington Strategy Report Advises." *South China Morning Post*. February 6, 2021.

propaganda efforts due to the U.S. taking a non-leadership role and could create a multi-polar region without causing a significant provocation with China.¹² India has recently expanded its concept of security threats from its continental borders to the maritime environment.

Additionally, India has made partnerships and coalitions the core of its Indo-Pacific efforts. Driving this growing concern for India is the proximity of Chinese expansion to its vital sea lines of communication critical to transporting people and goods.¹³

India's navy is leading the effort in the Indo-Pacific, but its current defense budget allocation is a paltry 15 percent. This lack of funding for the Indian navy has led Modi to rely heavily on regional partnerships, including annual summits and ongoing infrastructure collaborations with Japan. This partnership is not strictly aimed at military security, as India's geographic location makes it the ideal first responder for disaster relief in the region. India adopted Mission-Based Deployments (MBDs) in 2017, with ships and aircraft consistently deployed to seven key locations. However, its lack of overseas military bases creates a logistics challenge for continued presence.¹⁴

The U.S. can offer assistance to India to bolster cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to exploit China's geographic vulnerability. The U.S. could expand its existing logistical facilities agreement with India to provide access to military facilities in Guam.¹⁵ Additionally, it can expand military exercises with India and other regional states to create an environment for seamless Indo-Pacific naval operations. India has already invited a U.S. representative to the first

¹² Medcalf and Mohen, "U.S.-China Rivalry."

¹³ Darshana Baruah. "India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theater of Opportunity." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. June 30, 2020.

¹⁴ Baruah, "India in the Indo-Pacific."

¹⁵ Baruah, "India in the Indo-Pacific."

tri-service exercise, Tiger-Triumph. The creation of the Indo-Pacific Division of the Indian Foreign Ministry has opened opportunities for joint sailing in the South China Sea.¹⁶

By exploiting the weakness associated with China's geographic position in relation to middle powers, the U.S. can achieve systemic disruption in China's gray-zone coercion activities and its stated goal of dominating the global supply chain.¹⁷ The repercussions could help overcome some of the lack of parity in the maritime environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

Undersea Operations

The U.S. is not relegated to relying on coalitions for the application of relational maneuver in the Indo-Pacific as a counter to China. It has unilateral capability, as well as partnerships, as it relates to undersea operations in the Indo-Pacific. China's numerical superiority does not extend to all areas of maritime operations. The U.S. maintains an asymmetric advantage over China in its attack submarine force. This advantage creates a significant opportunity to employ relational maneuver in the manner that Luttwak prescribes. Luttwak maintains that "secrecy and deception are integral and of primary importance" in activities that are aimed at exploiting enemy vulnerabilities.¹⁸ The U.S. submarine force enjoys a significant advantage over China in terms of continuity of operations and the ability to detect enemy vessels while avoiding detection themselves.¹⁹

This advantage may be fleeting, emphasizing the importance of employing robust efforts in undersea operations to exploit this vulnerability before it vanishes. The U.S. enjoyed a significant advantage in the maritime environment near the Chinese mainland in 1996. This

¹⁶ Richard Rossow. "U.S.-India Defense Ties: Rebalancing the Indo-Pacific." *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. February 11, 2021.

¹⁷ Ashley Townshend, Thomas Lonergan and Toby Warden. "The U.S.-Australian Alliance Needs a Strategy to Deter China's Gray-Zone Coercion." *War on the Rocks*. September 29, 2021.

¹⁸ Luttwak, "Attrition," 179.

¹⁹ Tsuyoshi Nasagawa and Tsukasa Hadano. "U.S.-China Rivalry Flares Undersea With Australian Submarine Deal." *Nikkei Asia*. September 17, 2021.

advantage has progressed to a Chinese advantage closer to mainland China and approximate parity farther from mainland China.²⁰ The trend is not uniform across all mission areas, as China is well behind the U.S. and other navies in anti-submarine warfare. China recognizes this deficiency and is rapidly working to mitigate it through development. Projections for the Chinese defense budget show a potential share increase of 82 percent. Additional mitigation measures include a robust over-the-horizon intelligence mechanism, improving surveillance and reconnaissance capability. The result has been some level of growth in the effectiveness of the Chinese submarine fleet. The number of attack opportunities Chinese submarines may achieve against carriers rose by an order of magnitude between 1996 and 2010.²¹ China has also increased its daring to overcome its shortfalls in undersea operations. In September 2021, Japan detected a suspected Chinese submarine in the contiguous zone off the East China Sea Island of Amami Oshima. China has expanded its undersea operations closer to Australia in recent years.

The U.S. and its allies have taken strides to preserve this advantage in the undersea environment. Australia has decided to acquire nuclear-powered submarines due to its trilateral security pact with the U.S. and the UK. Australia plans to build a nuclear submarine base on its east coast to support this new acquisition.²² While the Australian decision may have been influenced by its geographic isolation from its partners and allies, its outcome could be potentially significant for future monitoring and deterrence of Chinese naval power in the Indo-Pacific.

²⁰ Eric Heginbotham et al. "The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017." *Rand Corporation*. 2015.

²¹ Heginbotham et al, "U.S.-China."

²² Dzirhan Mahadzir. "Australia to Build New Sub Base for Nuclear Attack Boat Fleet." *United States Naval Institute*. March 7, 2022.

The addition of Australian nuclear-powered vessels and bases is a critical, long-term investment for altering dominance in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. planned force of 55 attack submarines is projected to decline to 42 over the next decade. Without immediately leveraging asymmetric advantages as called for by relational maneuver, the U.S. and its allies could be at increased risk due to Chinese naval modernization efforts. The best Chinese destroyers, frigates, and fast-attack craft are currently armed with anti-ship missiles that outrange those on U.S. warships.²³ The submarine force presents a viable threat that would give China pause in future aggressions, especially ones that escalate competition to conflict. During a seven-day campaign, U.S. submarines can destroy nearly 40 percent of Chinese amphibious shipping.²⁴ Augmenting this force with additional undersea assets makes this threat more prevalent for China.

To maximize the principle of exploiting vulnerabilities in relational maneuver, the U.S. must emphasize submarine deployment and more resources to submarine construction. The U.S. deploys 60 percent of its submarine fleet to the Pacific in its current state. An increase in the percentage of deployed submarines should be considered in the short term to maximize exploitation. The repositioning of Virginia in the Pacific should be implemented, including basing new Virginia class submarines in San Diego and Hawaii, along with additional submarines in Guam.²⁵ In the long term, new submarine construction needs to be the focal point for the U.S. The current build rate of two per year for new submarine construction is too slow for continuing the asymmetric advantage present in undersea operations. The rate build rate needs to be increased to three per year to adequately increase the size of the submarine force and mitigate

²³ David League and Benjamin Lim. "The China Challenge: Ruling the Waves." *Reuters*. April 30, 2019.

²⁴ Heginbotham et al, "U.S. China."

²⁵ Thompson, "U.S. Shipbuilding."

projected losses. The U.S. needs to ensure that as many Los Angeles attack submarines receive service life extensions as a stop-gap measure until production rates can be increased.

Chinese estimates acknowledge that enemy submarines pose a grave threat to its maritime operations. By focusing on undersea operations as a line of effort to exploit vulnerabilities, the resulting outcome for China could be similar to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. An increase in the submarine threat to China can force China to protect its assets by establishing a coastal bastion. When Moscow adopted this strategy in the mid-1970s, it was forced to make significant adjustments to its overall naval strategy. The result was a reallocation of a substantial portion of all naval assets to support its SSBN operations. This reallocation created an environment where its navy was left with inadequate resources for other maritime operations.²⁶ As a result, China would need to develop additional aircraft carriers, significantly shifting its focus away from low-complexity shipbuilding. The impact on the speed of modernization and development for this type of departure is unknown, but it has the potential for a significant impact.

Irregular Warfare

The emergence of great power competition has undoubtedly highlighted the operational shortfalls in capacity and capability development for the U.S. military. Nonetheless, it would be a critical error to focus the entirety of U.S. efforts as it relates to relational maneuver on the buildup and utilization of conventional warfare assets. This is especially true given the projected date of entry of the Australian nuclear-powered submarines (the late 2030s). China has increasingly turned to irregular warfare to achieve its aims in the South China Sea with minimal involvement of conventional forces in these activities. This utilization of irregular warfare fits

²⁶ Tong Zhao. "Tides of Change: The Impact of Chinese Supporting Capabilities." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. October 24, 2018.

projections for how China will engage in future, large-scale conflict. China will likely utilize an irregular warfare concept focused on information and influence while integrating conventional capabilities. The future of great power competition does not represent a shift from irregular warfare to conventional, but an amalgamation of the two.²⁷

The Department of Defense and the Biden administration rightly recognize the need for a continued focus on using irregular warfare to influence competition in areas below the threshold of armed conflict. Former Acting Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict stated, “Our doctrine, acquisition, and training for conflict is excessively focused on maintaining deterrence or winning the high-end conventional war fight when the simple reality is that modern warfare is not that clear-cut.”²⁸ Additionally, the Irregular Warfare Annex to National Defense Strategy details the cost-effectiveness of irregular warfare options as an alternative to costly research and development projects necessary for fielding conventional systems.²⁹

The U.S. and its allies should pursue irregular warfare activities that seize on China’s vulnerabilities and force them to divert their resources to immediate disputes on land and sea to prevent it from expanding to global maritime power.³⁰ Additionally, disruption of China’s gray-zone activities and the implementation of gray-zone dilemmas for China can impose significant costs. This disruption can be accomplished through information, psychological, civil-military, intelligence, and counter-intelligence operations. The U.S. should also develop low-cost, unorthodox capabilities that can create complications in Chinese planning without risking

²⁷ David Knoll, Kevin Pollpeter and Sam Plapinger. “China’s Irregular Approach to War: The Myth of a Purely Conventional Future Fight.” *Modern War Institute*. April 27, 2021.

²⁸ O’Hanlon, “An Asymmetric Defense.”

²⁹ David Vergun. “Irregular Warfare Annex to National Defense Strategy Made Public.” *U.S. Department of Defense*. October 2, 2020.

³⁰ Zhen, “China’s Big Weaknesses,” February 6, 2021.

attribution. Creating these complications can be accomplished by utilizing proxies to conduct electronic disruption and build pockets of influence designed to disrupt China's expansionary model.³¹

China's continued movement away from a conventional war, which involved human-wave tactics in land-centric battles, further highlights the need for expanded efforts in irregular warfare. China has focused on winning "informationized wars" with information superiority at the forefront. Public opinion psychological and legal warfare are the three central tenets of China's plan for conducting irregular warfare activities. Perhaps more importantly, China has decided to employ its irregular warfare activities without waiting for the outbreak of conventional war. China utilizes its maritime militia against U.S. partners to establish and maintain regional superiority.³² These efforts have the potential to grow exponentially with the continued growth and modernization of the Chinese military.

The complexity, uncertainty, and instability inherent in irregular warfare require the U.S. to employ relational maneuver to counter and overcome its threat to the security environment. These irregular warfare activities must be implemented as soon as possible to prevent the potential of the Chinese improving its defenses to the point of eliminating the vulnerability and preventing exploitation. They allow the U.S. to maintain a global forward presence without the risk inherent in direct combat operations with China.³³ They have the potential to force China into a decision between landward and seaward strategies for growth. Further, they allow the U.S.

³¹ Townshend, Lonergan and Warden, "U.S.-Australian Alliance."

³² Knoll, Pollpeter and Plapinger, "China's Irregular Approach."

³³ Michael Ferguson, "Irregular Warfare Is Great Power Competition-Part 1." *War Room-U.S. Army War College*, August 19, 2021.

to stay agile enough to manage complex regional crises while preventing China from concentrating on a global mission.³⁴

Detractors and the Path Forward

The U.S. and China are undoubtedly engaged in great power competition at this point in history. However, there are no indications that either side has an incredible interest in escalating activities into something that would trend toward direct conflict. Therefore, an argument could be made that implementing relational maneuver concepts in the competitive environment may force an escalation. This line of thought leads to the notion that treating China as an adversary will only encourage it to become one and close avenues of cooperation for the future.

Moreover, the argument is strengthened considering the risk of employing relational maneuver in the peacetime environment. Relational maneuver has a higher risk of failure because it relies so heavily on the correct identification of enemy vulnerabilities. If these assessments are inaccurate, the risk to mission and force increase exponentially.³⁵ Further, if an assessment leads to a mistake in military action, the risk of provoking a nuclear power becomes a real possibility.

This argument ignores key factors for why relational maneuver should be employed in the current peacetime environment. China's aggressive behavior has increased without U.S. provocation over the past 20 years. The U.S. has continually tried to incorporate China into the existing global world order in the name of cooperation and peace during this period, yet it has not deterred Chinese aggression.³⁶ More importantly, a November 2019 bipartisan commission

³⁴ Zhen, "China's Big Weaknesses," February 6, 2021.

³⁵ Luttwak, "Attrition," 179.

³⁶ Montgomery and Sayers, "Grand Strategic."

in Congress reported that the U.S. could face a significant military defeat in a war with China in Taiwan's regional environment.³⁷ As it stands, China will likely continue its aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific. This aggression will further disrupt the U.S. vision for a free and open ocean. The capacity and capability gap will continue to grow, making the situation increasingly dire for a future, a rules-based international order that does not favor the west.

The U.S. must take appropriate action in the immediate future to exploit Chinese vulnerabilities related to its geographic position in relation to middle-powers, its lack of parity in undersea operations, and its susceptibility to irregular warfare in the region. The U.S. should pursue former Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite's vision for reestablishing the First Fleet for dedicated Indo-Pacific operations. The reestablishment of a numbered fleet will take considerable time and resources.

In the interim, the U.S Navy should make significant changes in how it weighs its priorities for materiel production related to submarines. Submarines should be prioritized ahead of all other shipbuilding priorities in the near future to increase production rate and signal to industry partners the intent of long-term investment in these programs. The U.S. Navy should seek additional opportunities to conduct joint military exercises or patrols with middle-powers in the Indo-Pacific to strengthen coalitions and partnerships and demonstrate the commitment and ability to impact the regional security environment. The increased interaction with middle-

³⁷ League and Lim, "The China Challenge."

powers in the region may lead to opportunities to posture irregular warfare assets or create non-attributional, gray-zone complications for China.

Lastly, the Department of Defense should reevaluate its budget allocation process for individual service components. The importance of the sea lines of communication has never been more evident after exposure to supply-chain disruption during the COVID pandemic. Consequently, the need for a vital, responsive naval force has taken on unprecedented value. The budget cannot be split relatively evenly between the services for national interest and the preservation of the international rules-based order. The U.S. Navy should receive a disproportionately higher portion of the defense budget, especially compared to the U.S. Army, over the next decade to facilitate the necessary materiel, manpower, training, and deployments to realize the potential for relational maneuver in great power competition.

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