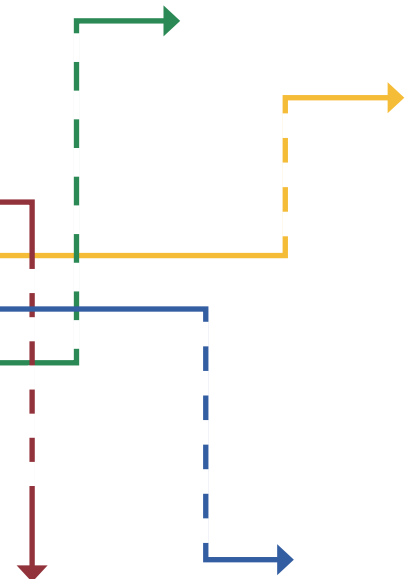




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Alternative Futures Following a Great Power War

Volume 1, Scenarios, Findings, and Recommendations



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Preface

The United States has been increasingly focused on the possibility of a great power war with Russia or China. To inform thinking about such a conflict, the U.S. Air Force asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to generate alternative futures following a near-term great power war. The research is discussed in this volume and a second one:

- *Alternative Futures Following a Great Power War: Vol. 2, Supporting Material on Historical Great Power Wars*, RR-A591-2, 2023. This volume provides a series of summaries of past great power wars. These summaries informed the design of scenarios in Vol. 1 and substantiate our discussion of flawed assumptions prior to past great power wars.

The research reported here was commissioned by Headquarters Air Force, Directorate of Strategy, Posture, and Assessments. It was conducted within the Strategy and Doctrine Program of RAND Project AIR FORCE as part of a fiscal year 2020 project *Alternative Futures: Aftermath of Conflict with a Near-Peer*. This report was finalized in January 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has not been subsequently updated.

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Summary

Issue

The U.S. Department of Defense has been increasingly focused on the possibility of a great power war. To inform long-term thinking about such a war, we assess how the strategic environment could change after this type of rare but consequential war.

Approach

We generated four hypothetical great power war scenarios and examined their postwar consequences. Because the victor of a great power war is thought to have outsized influence on the postwar environment, we designed scenarios with different winners. To generate plausible narratives that could lead to such outcomes and assess other consequences of such a war, we drew from the literature on contemporary decisionmaking in key states; the international relations literature on foreign policy decisionmaking, interstate war, and alliances; and analogies from historical great power wars. We also examined the history of predictions prior to past great power wars to identify common errors and to offer planners, decisionmakers, and analysts guidance on whether any existing assumptions might merit additional consideration. This report considers the four hypothetical great power war scenarios listed in Table S.1. This report was finalized in January 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has not been subsequently updated.

Conclusions

Although our hypothetical scenarios cannot be used to predict the most-likely postwar outcomes, they do highlight the following plausible outcomes that U.S. decisionmakers and planners should consider:

- Wartime victory might not produce a favorable postwar setting. For example, victors will be weakened relative to noncombatant states and could face stronger balancing coalitions.
- A U.S. victory could provoke deeper Sino-Russian military and economic cooperation—or even a mutual defense pact.
- A great power war, even one with Russia, could sharpen the U.S. focus on the Indo-Pacific. Postwar resource constraints would create incentives to prioritize China as the most significant potential threat to the United States.
- Although wars can strengthen bonds between allies, postwar alliance cohesion could suffer from wartime disagreements and how allies respond to the changed strategic environment.

- Allied contributions to a U.S.-led war with Russia or China might vary across and even within scenarios, suggesting the importance of plans that are robust to changes in access.
- U.S. allies and partners might face new incentives to proliferate after a great power war that degrades U.S. power.

Recommendations

- Assess the potential postwar consequences of a war that goes according to planners' assumptions (as well as those that do not) to evaluate whether existing war plans are likely to support long-term U.S. interests.
- Consider setting a futures game in a period following a great power war to assess whether proposed capabilities would be appropriate in an unfamiliar strategic context.

Table S.1. Hypothetical Great Power War Scenarios Examined in This Report

Scenario	Victor	Role of Nuclear Weapons	Length	Strategic Outcomes
China annexes Taiwan	China	Conflict ends with China's demonstration of an NSNW	8 months	• China solidifies control of Taiwan. • A U.S.-led multilateral counterbalancing alliance forms. • Japan, South Korea pursue nuclear weapons.
The United States degrades China's military power after an East China Sea conflict expands	United States and Japan	Possibility of nuclear escalation affects combatants' targeting	6 months	• China commits to military rebuilding program. • Russia and China formalize a military alliance. • U.S. allies and partners continue to hedge.
A Taiwan conflict ends indecisively	Indecisive	Possibility of nuclear escalation affects combatants' targeting	4 months	• The possibility of renewed conflict drives a regional arms race. • U.S. troops remain on Taiwan. • The PRC restarts conflict to take Taiwan four years later.
War caused by Russian misperception ends in restrictions on military forces in northeastern Europe	Indecisive	Russian losses lead to use of NSNWs and to U.S. use of NSNWs in response	3 months	• A NATO-Russia agreement limits foreign forces in Baltic States, Poland, Belarus, and Kaliningrad. • Germany revokes U.S. basing access, forcing a posture realignment. • Poland initiates nuclear program and shifts toward authoritarianism.

NOTES: NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization; NSNW = nonstrategic nuclear weapon; PRC = People's Republic of China.

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Abbreviations

A2AD	anti-access and area denial
ALCM	air-launched cruise missile
AOR	area of responsibility
APS	Army prepositioned stock
ASAT	anti-satellite
ASCM	anti-ship cruise missile
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BTG	battalion tactical group
C2	command and control
CAP	combat air patrol
CBM	confidence-building measure
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CMC	Central Military Commission
CONUS	continental United States
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSG	carrier strike group
DA-ASAT	direct-ascent anti-satellite
DCA	defensive counterair
DPP	Democratic People's Party
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
eFP	enhanced forward presence
EU	European Union
FY	fiscal year
GDP	gross domestic product
HQ	headquarters
IADS	integrated air defense system
INDOPACOM	U.S. Indo-Pacific Command
INF	intermediate-range nuclear forces
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JASSM	Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile
JCG	Japan Coast Guard
JMSDF	Japan Maritime Self Defense Force

JSDF	Japan Self Defense Forces
KMT	Kuomintang
LEO	low Earth orbit
LNG	liquified natural gas
LRA	long-range aviation
LRASM	Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NSNW	nonstrategic nuclear weapon
NSS	National Security Strategy
PATO	Pacific Alliance Treaty Organization
PGM	precision-guided munition
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PLARF	People's Liberation Army Rocket Force
PRC	People's Republic of China
PrSM	Precision Strike Missile
RAF	Royal Air Force
ROC	Republic of China
ROCAF	Republic of China Air Force
ROCN	Republic of China Navy
ROK	Republic of Korea
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander-Europe
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SEAD	suppression of enemy air defense
SOF	special operations force
SPD	Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands)
SRBM	short-range ballistic missile
SSBN	ballistic missile submarine
SSN	nuclear-powered attack submarine
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
TLAM	Tomahawk Land-Attack Missile
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

USAF
VJTF
WTO

U.S. Air Force
Very High Readiness Joint Task Force
World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

NOTE: This report was finalized in January 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has not been subsequently updated.

Wars between states are rare and *great power wars*—conflicts that involve two or more of the most-powerful states in the international system—are even more uncommon.¹ Still, such wars have historically been among the most-consequential international events: They lead to high numbers of casualties and massive destruction, and they have the capacity to reshape societies and the international system more broadly. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) argued that changes in Chinese and Russian capabilities and behavior are threatening U.S. interests. In the case of Russia, the NSS states explicitly that the risk of war is becoming more likely, arguing that “the combination of Russian ambition and growing military capabilities creates an unstable frontier in Eurasia, where the risk of conflict due to Russian miscalculation is growing.”² The NSS, therefore, emphasizes investing in the military and strengthening alliances as ways to deter—and, failing that, prevail—in a great power war.³

To inform long-range thinking about such a conflict, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) asked RAND Project AIR FORCE, a division of the RAND Corporation, to identify ways that the strategic environment might change after a near-term war between the United States and Russia and/or China. Rather than focusing on the aftermath of low-intensity conflicts or of wars that end in a devastating strategic nuclear exchange, the USAF asked RAND to focus on conflicts between these two extremes. This report describes four high-intensity, largely conventional war scenarios, each of them several months in duration. In doing so, we considered how key features of these wars might vary (e.g., wars in which the aims of the belligerents stay limited and wars in which they expand dramatically). The primary goal of this report, therefore, is to provide narratives about plausible, if unlikely, great power wars that planners can use to help examine assumptions they might make as they prepare for such wars; a secondary goal is to illustrate how key features of a war might translate into changes in the postwar environment to which the United States, and the USAF, might need to adapt.

¹ Previous RAND research describes how “the overall levels of deadly political conflict had been declining for decades . . . [I]nterstate armed conflict has decreased the most, both in the incidence and intensity of armed conflict, so that its incidence is increasingly rare and occurs mostly at lower intensities.” Thomas S. Szayna, Stephen Watts, Angela O’Mahony, Bryan Frederick, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *What Are the Trends in Armed Conflicts, and What Do They Mean for U.S. Defense Policy?* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1904-A, 2017, p. 3.

² The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017, p. 26.

³ White House, 2017, pp. 26–28.

The remainder of this introduction highlights the importance of examining alternative futures by summarizing the history of incorrect predictions prior to past great power wars. We then describe the report’s methodology and organization.

Historical Assumptions and the Realities of Great Power War

The history of great power conflict is littered with mistaken predictions, which we detail in Volume 2 of this report.⁴ Our examination of ten great power wars since 1815—ranging from brief but decisive confrontations, such as the 1866 Seven Weeks War, to protracted wars of exhaustion, such as World War I—found that, in all cases, politicians and military planners held poor assumptions and made inaccurate predications about critical aspects of the war that would follow (Table 1.1).⁵

⁴ Alexandra T. Evans, *Alternative Futures Following a Great Power War*, Vol. 2, *Supporting Material on Historical Great Power Wars*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A591-2, 2023.

⁵ For a description of each war and how we selected the ten cases, see Volume 2 (Evans, 2023). Throughout these reports, we define a *war* as a conflict between two or more states that involves more than 1,000 battle deaths. A *great power* is a state that is in reality and widely perceived to be among the most militarily and economically capable countries in the international system. For a discussion of these definitions, see Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System: 1495–1975*, Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1983a.

Table 1.1. Accuracy of Key Predictions Prior to Great Power Wars

Great Power War	Length	Parties to Conflict	Effects of New Technology	Intensity of Fighting and Extent of Damage	Consequences for Regional and Global Balance of Power
Crimean War (1853–1856)					
Austro-Prussian War (1866)					
Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871)					
Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878)					
Sino-Japanese War (1894)					
Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905)					
World War I (1914–1918)					
World War II (Asia) (1931–1945)					
World War II (Europe) (1939–1945)					
Korean War (1950–1953)					

NOTE: Dark red indicates each of the great power combatants' prewar assumptions about this factor were incorrect; light green indicates that all of the great power combatants accurately forecasted major features of the war; yellow indicates mixed success where either combatants' predictions included both accurate and inaccurate elements, or where one or more (but not all) of the primary combatants correctly predicted that particular aspect of the war. To account for the conflict in Asia before Japan's 1940 entry into the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, and to consider combatants' regionally specific prewar assumptions and ambitions, the history of World War II in Asia is treated separately from the European theater.

Political and military leaders often discovered only once a conflict had begun that they had miscalculated the balance of power, the resolve of their adversaries, the commitment of their allies, or the costs and benefits of conflict. Inaccurate predictions about different aspects of a war were often interrelated. For example, incorrect predictions of the number of parties to a conflict or the effects of new technology were often why a combatant underestimated the length of a war. This section provides a summary of our findings (also depicted in Table 1.1).

Incorrect Predictions About Parties to a Conflict and Will to Fight a Long War

Great powers have frequently misunderstood other states' interests and therefore failed to predict the likelihood of third-party interventions in a conflict. Noteworthy examples are Adolf Hitler's underestimation of French and British commitments to Poland in 1939 and Kim Il Sung's and Joseph Stalin's assumption that the United States would not fight to defend South Korea in 1950.⁶ The United States also failed to understand China's security concerns and

⁶ R. A. C. Parker, *The Second World War: A Short History*, revised ed., London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; Kathryn Weathersby, "The Soviet Role in the Korean War: The State of Historical Knowledge," in William Stueck, ed., *The Korean War in World History*, Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

therefore did not predict China's entry into the Korean War.⁷ Russia underestimated other states' interests and launched what would become the Crimean War without predicting that both Britain and France would intervene to defend the Ottoman Empire's integrity.⁸ The consequences of such miscalculations reverberated throughout the course of the conflicts; having underestimated the number of combatants, aggressors therefore also underestimated the length and cost of a conflict and even incorrectly predicted who would win the war.

In other instances, great powers recognized that their actions would provoke another state to join a conflict but underestimated that state's willingness to sustain a protracted and costly conflict. One illustrative example is Japan's choice to expand the war in Asia in 1941 rather than accept what it considered an intolerable oil embargo. Despite wargames illustrating the risks, Japanese leaders gambled that the United States would, after an initial period of fierce fighting, accept a negotiated resolution that ceded domination of East Asia rather than continue a costly cross-Pacific campaign, and that the United States lacked the political will or martial spirit to see such a campaign to the end.⁹ Instead, the United States mounted a ferocious and costly island-hopping strategy that exploited the superior American industrial base, exhausted Japanese resources, and forced Japan's unconditional surrender.¹⁰

Likewise, great power military planners have failed to predict local populations' reactions to invading forces and how those reactions would increase lengths of conflicts. In preparing for its war with Prussia in 1870, France bet that the people of the southern Germanic states would lend their support to the invading French army, which promised liberation from Prussian domination. Instead, the invasion solidified intra-German bonds and contributed to the establishment of a unified Germany.¹¹ Ironically, the war did trigger a series of popular uprisings within France, which overturned the government in Paris and launched a failed insurgency against the German occupiers.¹² A half-century later, Japan, too, failed to anticipate how its invasion of China and other southeastern Asian states would intensify nationalist sentiments that hindered its colonial

⁷ Jack S. Levy, "Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems," *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 1, October 1983b, p. 90; Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1982, pp. 51–61.

⁸ Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History*, New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2012, pp. 102–126.

⁹ On Japan's strategy against the United States, see Jeffrey Record, *Japan's Decision for War in 1941: Some Enduring Lessons*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2009, pp. 8, 23–25; Dan Reiter, *How Wars End*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 188; and Scott D. Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars), Spring 1988, p. 895.

¹⁰ Robert Jervis, *Perceiving and Coping with Threat, Psychology and Deterrence*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985; Record, 2009.

¹¹ Thomas J. Christensen, "Perceptions and Alliances in Europe, 1865–1940," *International Organizations*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Winter 1997b, p. 79.

¹² Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871*, Cambridge, United Kingdom (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2004.

expansion and provided the Allied powers with inroads to form anti-Japanese alliances.¹³ Similar to inaccurate predictions about state parties to a conflict, incorrect expectations about civilian reactions have also led states to underestimate the lengths and costs of conflict.

Misunderstandings About the Effects of New Technology

Difficulty in evaluating the consequences of technological innovation and organizational reforms can skew forecasts of the risk, duration, and intensity of a conflict. Strategists have often overlooked or discounted evidence that a new technology has altered the conduct of war or the distribution of power. Over the decades before World War I, for example, European planners misinterpreted or overlooked ample evidence that changes in the technology, organization, and conduct of warfare would make battles longer, costlier, and less decisive. The Russo-Turkish, Sino-Japanese, and Russo-Japanese wars showcased industrialized warfare, improvements in small arms and firepower, and the difficulties associated with attacking entrenched positions, but the European and U.S. military intellectuals who scrutinized the conflicts attributed war outcomes to intangible factors (such as morale, domestic opinion, and culture) rather than to a technological shift that favored defensive operations more than offensive ones, contrary to what thinkers at the time assumed.¹⁴ As historian Michael Howard has written, “experts tended to read into the experiences of the war very much what they wanted to find.”¹⁵

Even when military planners were aware of new technologies, the potential remained to misunderstand specific attributes or potential effects on a battlefield. For instance, two simultaneous errors contributed to French planners’ fatal forecast that France would defeat Prussia in 1870: first, an overestimation of recent French organizational reforms and technological innovations (such as the breech-loading *chassepot* rifle and *mitrailleuse* machine gun, which promised to mitigate Prussian numerical advantages); and second, an underestimation of known Prussian improvements in metallurgy, ballistics, precision engineering, and transportation, which ultimately allowed the German forces to outnumber, outgun, and outmaneuver the once dominant French army.¹⁶ Although our historical review discovered instances of similar miscalculations by all types of great powers, declining powers seemed less able to recognize evidence that a new technology might strengthen a rising challenger. After a thousand years of regional hegemony, for instance, China’s assumption that

¹³ North Korea similarly bet that its invasion of the south would trigger a mass uprising against the government in Seoul (Weathersby, 2004, pp. 40–41).

¹⁴ Nicholas Murray, *The Rocky Road to the Great War: The Evolution of Trench Warfare to 1914*, Omaha, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, Potomac Books, 2013; Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1984.

¹⁵ Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991.

¹⁶ Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France 1870–1871*, New York: Macmillan, 1961; A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe: 1848–1918*, Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1954.

no Asian power would challenge its domination contributed to its failure to monitor Japan's naval investments in the early 1890s— an error that Russia repeated a mere decade later in its estimation of Japan's strength.¹⁷

Incorrect Predictions About the Length, Intensity, or Cost of Conflict

Great powers have frequently underestimated conflict duration and the scale of military losses, sometimes because of the reasons discussed in the previous two sections. The European powers' July 1914 prediction that their war would be over by Christmas is perhaps the most infamous example of underestimating the length of a conflict. As another example, pervasive cultural stereotypes of Asian inferiority and undue optimism over the effect of recent military reforms blinded Russian military leaders prior to the 1904 war with Japan to both the evidence of Japan's rising strength and their own vulnerability in the Far East.¹⁸ Soviet and North Korean planners made a different type of predictive error in 1950 when they failed to anticipate the likelihood of U.S. entry into the conflict on South Korea's behalf, but the effect on their judgments was ultimately the same: an undue confidence in the likelihood of a swift and decisive victory that encouraged risky behavior and skewed prewar planning.¹⁹ Conversely, a misreading of the military balance led Austrian and French planners to overestimate the duration of an Austrian-Prussian confrontation in the mid-1860s; defying expectations that the German states would become entrapped in a long war of mutual exhaustion, Prussia defeated its long-standing rival in a mere six weeks.²⁰

Misunderstanding of the Consequences of Conflict

Any of the previous types of errors can hinder planners' ability to accurately predict the outcome of a great power war. Misassumptions about adversaries' resolve, the effect of new technologies, the number of combatants, the durability of alliances, and the intensity and duration of conflict can each skew assessments of the overall military balance and encourage false predictions of the probability of victory or defeat. Yet states have also struggled to forecast the strategic consequences of a conflict, such as the durability of wartime gains, the ease of

¹⁷ S. C. M. Paine, "Imperial Failure in the Industrial Age: China, 1842–1911," in N. A. M. Rodger and Christian Buchet, eds., *The Sea in History—The Modern World*, Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell & Brewer Press, 2017. Also see Samuel C. Chu, "China's Attitudes Toward Japan at the Time of the Sino-Japanese War," in Akira Iriye, ed., *The Chinese and the Japanese: Essays in Political and Cultural Interactions*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 75–76.

¹⁸ Jack S. Levy and William Mulligan, "Shifting Power, Preventive Logic, and the Response of the Target: Germany, Russia, and the First World War," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 2017; Bruce W. Menning, "Miscalculating One's Enemies: Russian Military Intelligence Before the Russo-Japanese War," *War in History*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2006.

¹⁹ Weathersby, 2004.

²⁰ Christensen, 1997b.

restoring stability, the risk of conflict recurrence, and the long-term implications for the balance of power.

Concentrating on the relatively near-term task of defeating a rival or securing territorial and political concessions has often led states to overestimate their ability to hold on to wartime gains, as Japan discovered after its wars with China in 1894 and with Russia in 1905.²¹ In some cases, states that had not been party to the conflict exploited the relative weaknesses of those that had, and victors failed to anticipate this development. Japan, for instance, did not adequately prepare for the possibility that European powers would compel it to return territory gained from its war with China or be able to exclude it from other East Asian markets.²² Likewise, Russia's celebration over its 1878 defeat of the Ottoman Empire was dulled when Prussia, which had not intervened in the conflict, convened an inter-European conference to weaken Russian influence and restore the prewar continental equilibrium.²³ In other instances, divisions within a victorious coalition forced weaker partners to accept more-limited gains, as the Soviet Union discovered in Europe after World War II.

Similarly, states have overestimated the likelihood of a decisive outcome and misjudged the risk of postwar instability. Initial postwar settlements are often revised through later conferences and treaties that can alter terms for the repayment of war debts, levying of punitive industrial or military restrictions, and distribution of territory or drawing of borders. Territorial compromises can strain regional relationships, producing new flashpoints for later crises. Having allied to wrest Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark in 1864, for instance, Austria and Prussia went to war a mere two years later in part over control of these long-disputed duchies.²⁴ Alternatively, new governing arrangements can create or intensify local grievances. Intended to stabilize the Balkans and avert another regional war, the complex governing structures erected after the Russo-Turkish War of 1878 instead fanned nationalist sentiments and eroded Ottoman and Austrian-Hungarian control in the region. The result was a series of later crises and conflicts that culminated in the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand that triggered World War I.²⁵

This tendency to underestimate the risk of postwar instability often hampers efforts to anticipate the risk of conflict recurrence. After its defeat in the Crimean War and its victory in the Russo-Turkish War, St. Petersburg was surprised that the financial, military, and political

²¹ Mark R. Peattie, and Peter Duus, "The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945," in Peter Duus, ed., *The Cambridge History of Japan*, Vol. 6, *The Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

²² Akira Iriye, "Japan's Drive to Great Power Status," in Marius B. Jansen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Japan*, Vol. 5, *The Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

²³ For more on the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, see Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, Vol. II, *The Period of Consolidation, 1871–1880*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 416–17, 434.

²⁴ Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification*, 2nd ed., London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

²⁵ Eric D. Weitz, "From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 113, No. 5, December 2008.

costs of war had weakened the empire and empowered its European and Asian rivals. Rather than expand Russian influence, the wars accelerated Russia's decline by both exhausting its resources and fomenting unrest in the Balkans that contributed to repeated political and military crises.²⁶

Likewise, a war's potential effect on the regional or international balance of power can be difficult to predict. Focused on a single rival, a state might discover it has misdirected its attention only after a war reveals a previously concealed or overlooked shift in the balance of power. Preoccupied with its overseas competitions with Britain and Russia (and confident that Austria would remain the dominant German power), France in 1866 initially discounted the emerging Prussian threat and chose not to support Vienna in its war. Only after Prussia soundly defeated Austria did French planners begin to revise their estimates, although they continued to overstate their own advantage. Alternatively, a conflict can so dramatically accelerate preexisting structural changes that the resulting shift exceeds planners' expectations in scale, though perhaps not in character. By 1939, international observers recognized that the United States' international economic and political influence was likely to grow in the decades ahead, but neither U.S. nor European strategists anticipated the scale of U.S. military, industrial, economic, and political domination that would follow World War II—nor that a country that historically evinced a doctrine of nonentanglement would embrace an internationalist grand strategy.²⁷

Lessons from the Past

Assumptions about the likely course or effects of great power war affect choices about whether and how states decide to fight. Yet history has shown that prewar predictions are often flawed. In some cases, there might be obvious shortcomings in analysis or decisionmaking. For example, a failure to seriously examine other countries' interests could contribute to poor predictions about allied reliability or adversary will to fight. Similarly, states that have been historically dominant could have such a strong preexisting belief in their own superiority that they overlook new evidence, such as the consequences of changing military technology or that the distribution of power has shifted.²⁸

This is not to say that planners and politicians are always wrong. We identified examples of states correctly predicting most key aspects of the war that followed. Prussia's defeat of Austria in 1866, for instance, validated its prewar assumption that it could wage a short but decisive war that would establish Prussian dominance over Central Europe and encourage German unification (an outcome that Austria, France, and others notably failed to predict accurately). Still, even

²⁶ Valerii L. Stepanov, "The Price of Victory: The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the Russian Economy," *Russian Studies in History*, Vol. 57, No. 3–4, 2018.

²⁷ For more on the United States' transformation, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992.

²⁸ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976.

states that avoid known decisionmaking pitfalls face uncertainty because of both a lack of information and the difficulty of predicting the complex interactions that can occur during a large-scale war.²⁹ For example, policymakers might have good intelligence about the number and specifications of adversary military systems but find it more difficult to gather reliable information on qualitative factors, such as how well adversary personnel are prepared to operate these systems in wartime conditions.³⁰

Whatever their cause, the history of incorrect predictions prior to past great power wars reinforces the importance of humility in predicting either the course of a conflict or the postwar environment that will follow. This history also suggests that leaders and planners should consider how a decision or plan might hold up in light of alternative possibilities.³¹ This report is intended to aid planners, decisionmakers, and analysts in examining their assumptions by offering four hypothetical war scenarios. The next section describes our approach to generating these scenarios.

Methodological Approach and Scenario Selection

Hypothetical war scenarios, such as the ones we develop in this report, show how events could develop in ways that might differ from current thinking.³² Scenarios can help leaders and planners think more broadly about the possible choices that they could face and outcomes that could result from a war. By considering such possibilities, leaders and planners can carefully consider different responses and their trade-offs with the benefit of time rather than confronting a new issue for the first time in the midst of a conflict or during the conflict's aftermath.³³ This type of exploration can also reveal peacetime investments or policy choices that could help produce better wartime outcomes that previously might not have been considered. Such

²⁹ James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 1995.

³⁰ For a discussion of how these qualitative factors can dramatically affect operational outcomes, see Daryl G. Press, "Lessons from Ground Combat in the Gulf: The Impact of Training and Technology," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Fall 1997. For a discussion of how states weigh qualitative factors, see Jonathan Shimshoni, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988.

³¹ For another discussion along these lines, see Michael J. Mazarr, Katharina Ley Best, Burgess Laird, Eric V. Larson, Michael E. Linick, and Dan Madden, *The U.S. Department of Defense's Planning Process: Components and Challenges*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2173/2-A, 2019.

³² For a more detailed discussion of the value of alternative scenarios in planning, see M. F. Oppenheimer, *Pivotal Countries, Alternate Futures: Using Scenarios to Manage American Strategy*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016.

³³ In addition, scenario analysis can provide some advantages over other methods of evaluating future risks and opportunities, such as wargaming or modeling. Those methods can provide tremendously detailed insights into particular operational or strategic problems, but they are more challenging to employ to evaluate prolonged series of events in the same level of detail (because of the time or level of effort that would pragmatically be required to do so) or to evaluate fundamental changes in the scenario or underlying parameters. Given the focus of this report on events of longer duration and the potential for fundamental changes in the postwar environment, the scenario analysis we conduct has the potential to provide advantages.

considerations can also prepare decisionmakers for the possibility that their assumptions might be wrong by helping them identify conditions to monitor, be more open to accepting evidence that their preexisting beliefs are wrong in the midst of a crisis, and adapt to changing circumstances. By illustrating a specific scenario in depth rather than making general observations about potentially important factors or relationships, we can make these possibilities more concrete for decisionmakers, allowing the lessons to be more easily absorbed. Scenarios also provide a useful tool for considering how different factors might interact under different circumstances and produce effects that might not have been anticipated.

Scenarios can be a useful tool for preparing decisionmakers for future circumstances that they might face, but scenarios also have limitations both in general and in the specific approach to scenario generation taken in this report. Importantly, the scenarios in this report are not intended to predict how the future will necessarily unfold. To generate scenarios, we assume, rather than predict, that a near-term war will take place. In reality, near-term great power wars of any type remain unlikely events.³⁴ Therefore, these scenarios cannot help policymakers identify which specific events or risks are most likely or which are most important to prepare for.

Although we have attempted to make our scenarios as realistic as possible—once the assumed conflict has begun—the course of great power wars is fraught with uncertainty and decisionmakers are likely to face unexpected events, as the discussion of past wars showed. During our scenario generation, we encountered numerous points where different outcomes were similarly plausible. Although we attempted to select the most likely course at these decision points by grounding our choices in analyses of how the key states in our scenarios make decisions, the uncertainty of the particular courses we selected remains high, and events within our scenarios could plausibly develop otherwise. We partially address this concern by considering four different scenarios, three involving war with China and one involving war with Russia, to illustrate a wider set of potential outcomes. Still, another set of scenarios could emphasize a different set of issues for decisionmakers that might be similarly plausible and important. Therefore, although our report is an important aid to decisionmakers concerned about the risk of future great power war, it is by no means the last or only possible word on the subject.

The remainder of this section describes the key aspects of the great power wars we explore in our scenarios, how we generated these scenarios, and how we made predictions about the course of the war and the strategic outcomes that we assessed would likely follow it.

Aspects of Future Great Power Wars We Explore

To generate these scenarios, we were forced to make decisions regarding which characteristics of war were most important to explore. We were unable to systematically catalog,

³⁴ Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Matthew Lane, Alexander Stephenson, and Colin P. Clarke, *A More Peaceful World? Regional Conflict Trends and U.S. Defense Planning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1177-A, 2017.

examine, or vary existing planning assumptions. U.S. war plans are highly classified and therefore unavailable for this study. Moreover, the full set of potential variation in scenarios could involve dozens or even hundreds of potential cases. Instead, we consider how a few key features of a great power war could plausibly vary and, through structured analysis, show how those differences interact to produce different postwar outcomes.

Drawing on the lessons from history described in this chapter and on wide-ranging discussions with U.S. defense officials and military planners regarding the types of scenario variation that they deemed to have been insufficiently explored in prior wargaming or analysis, our scenarios explore alternative expectations about the following key aspects of a potential future great power war:³⁵

- the parties to the conflict
- the role of nuclear weapons
- the length of conflict³⁶
- the victor.

We were unable to consider all possible variations in or combinations of these variables in a single report. However, the four scenarios we constructed offer a starting point for discussions about the assumptions that can help guide future games, analysis, plans, and decisions.

We focus on great power wars that last several months. This means that we explore wars that are longer than those found in some prominent pieces of open-source analysis and that have been a focus of U.S. Department of Defense planning since the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS).³⁷ At the same time, the wars we consider are shorter than wars of attrition

³⁵ A full set of aspects we considered is described in Figure 1.1.

³⁶ The length of the conflict was, in turn, informed by different assumptions regarding the likely geographic scope of the war, the potential for the aims of the combatants to expand during the conflict, and potential variation in the operational effectiveness of the military forces of the states involved.

³⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., 2018. For example, analysis by Heginbotham et al., which remains among the most-detailed open-source analyses of a conflict over Taiwan, considers the first 21 days of a conflict in its models, arguing that “Chinese forces would “either prevail within several weeks of the start of hostilities or run into increasingly severe logistical problems . . . that would ultimately doom the assault” (Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, David R. Frelinger, Burgess Laird, Kyle Brady, and Lyle J. Morris, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-392-AF, 2015, p. 328). Another RAND report notes that although the “assumption that a Sino-U.S. war would be over quickly is not supported by evidence that either side would rapidly exhaust its war-making capacity,” expansive war aims and immensely destructive fighting “seem unlikely in even a major Sino-U.S. war unless it stemmed from miscalculations during a conflict on the Korean peninsula” (David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR1140-A, 2016, pp. 7, 29). For a discussion of the logic behind a focus on the possibility of an adversary attempting a rapid victory, see Elbridge Colby, “Against the Great Powers: Reflections on Balancing Nuclear and Conventional Power,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, November 2018.

lasting a year or more, which other analysts highlight.³⁸ We focus on this middle range as a starting point for considering possible postwar outcomes. Assessment of postwar outcomes following shorter or longer conflicts is an important area for future research and would complement the analysis we present in this report.³⁹

Scope

This report focuses on hypothetical wars that take place within the next seven years. In each case, the key parties to the conflict are the United States and Russia and/or China. We did not consider conflicts that remain limited to small-scale military incidents or gray-zone activities. We also did not consider the other extreme of wars that escalate to strategic nuclear exchanges. This is not because we believe that strategic nuclear exchanges are an unlikely or impossible outcome of a future great power war; rather, it is because the world after such a war would be fundamentally different from the world that would follow a largely conventional war. Military and population centers could be devastated and societies shattered. Thinking about the postwar implications following such a conflict is valuable, but it is a fundamentally different task. Although our scenarios do not focus on the postwar consequences of strategic nuclear exchanges, we take nuclear dynamics seriously in this report and assume that the possibility of strategic nuclear war affects state decisionmaking throughout and after the war. We also describe scenarios that feature use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs).

Given our focus on wars that could occur a relatively short distance into the future, we assume that U.S. adversaries and allies remain largely the same as today in their capabilities and leadership, although we do explore some evolutions in this regard (as we discuss in each scenario). Moreover, we assume that the issues in dispute between the United States and China, such as the status of Taiwan, and between the United States and Russia remain similar to those of today. We expect that combatants might acquire new military systems that are currently under development, but we do not focus on revolutionary technological change. Given the USAF's interest in the strategic outcomes following a great power war, the conflict narratives focus on military operations at a high level rather than delving into operational detail.

³⁸ For example, one analysis of the Sino-U.S. military balance in undersea warfare imagines a conflict over Taiwan that lasts "several months," during which the United States significantly degrades Chinese naval forces (Owen R. Cote, Jr., *Assessing the Undersea Balance Between the U.S. and China*, MIT Security Studies Program Working Paper, February 2011).

³⁹ Precisely how long these conflicts lasted, however, was a result of our analysis of the most-likely actions that states would take during these wars given the conditions we specified. We were open to the possibility of even longer wars, lasting more than a year, but we were unable analytically to identify plausible scenarios with such durations that also had other characteristics we specified, such as the geographic locations of the conflict, the issues at stake, and an avoidance of the use of strategic nuclear weapons (as discussed in more detail later in this chapter). Therefore, our analysis should not be interpreted to imply that such longer wars could not occur, although we believe that changes to other assumptions we make would likely be required.

Scenario Generation

To ensure that we considered a variety of postwar outcomes, we intentionally developed scenarios that would lead to different victors. Specifically, we developed scenarios that would lead to a decisive U.S. win, a decisive adversary win, and indecisive outcomes. We focused first on varying victory in war because past research has shown that victors in great power wars tend to have significant effects on shaping the strategic environments that follow.⁴⁰ This suggests, for example, that the postwar environment following a Chinese victory would likely be quite different from one following a United States win. We then worked backward from knowing who the victor would be to a prewar context and set of stakes that could reasonably end in that outcome. For example, analysts have noted that China's capabilities to retake Taiwan have been improving. Therefore, a Taiwan scenario seemed an appropriate venue to explore a Chinese victory. At the same time, we wanted to consider a less-decisive outcome following a U.S.-China war. As we describe in Chapter 4, we were able to envision a different set of starting conditions for a war over Taiwan that could lead to a draw.⁴¹

We also intentionally varied the nuclear dynamics that would prevail across the four scenarios. We do not consider strategic nuclear exchanges, but even a small nuclear exchange could have dramatic effects on such outcomes as the relationships between states and the economic viability of targeted areas. Therefore, in addition to the victor, we designed scenarios that included different types of nuclear coercion or even nuclear employment. The scenarios we constructed—and how they varied according to our key aspects—are summarized in Table 1.2.

⁴⁰ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁴¹ We do not consider a Taiwan scenario that ends in a U.S. victory. This is not because of an assessment on our part that such an outcome is unlikely; rather, we used our second U.S.-China war scenario to explore other dynamics—such as an unintended escalation of China's gray-zone activities—that made more sense in the context of China's outstanding territorial disputes.

Table 1.2. Hypothetical Great Power War Scenarios Examined in This Report

Scenario	Key Parties to the Conflict	Role of Nuclear Weapons	Length	Victor
China annexes Taiwan	United States, Taiwan, China	Conflict ends with China's demonstration of an NSNW	8 months	China
The United States degrades China's military power after an East China Sea conflict expands	United States, China, Japan, Russia	Possibility of nuclear escalation affects combatants' targeting	6 months	United States and Japan
A Taiwan conflict ends indecisively	United States, Taiwan, China	Possibility of nuclear escalation affects combatants' targeting	4 months	Indecisive
War caused by Russian misperception ends in restrictions on military forces in northeastern Europe	United States, many NATO allies, Russia	Russian losses lead to use of NSNWs and to U.S. use of NSNWs in response	3 months	Indecisive

NOTE: NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Generating Scenario Details and Assessing Postwar Outcomes

Although the victor and type of nuclear use for each scenario were preordained, we developed a plausible narrative of how the war might proceed to end in such an outcome that resulted in variation across other key aspects of each scenario. As we did so, we could not describe every possible aspect of the war but focused instead on aspects of the conflict likely to affect postwar outcomes (Figure 1.1).

In each scenario, we systematically assess how individual states might respond to the starting conditions of a conflict and how these choices interact to create the course of the war and the resulting strategic outcomes. To do so, we draw on research of contemporary decisionmaking in each state; international relations literatures on decisionmaking, interstate war, and alliances; and analogies from historical great power wars. Because the narratives cannot focus on all aspects of a great power war, we focused on the variables depicted in Figure 1.1—U.S. and adversary military, economic, and diplomatic strategies and changes in objectives during the war. Each scenario features descriptions of major military losses and casualties for the key parties, drawn from expert judgment informed by a variety of analyses and unclassified wargaming, to provide an illustrative baseline for considering postwar outcomes. Detailed operational analysis of these scenarios is beyond the scope of this report, so these estimates are only rough approximations and should not be interpreted as being predictive.

Figure 1.1. Variables Discussed in Each Scenario



The text of each scenario describes a hypothetical conflict in chronological order as if it has already occurred. For the post-conflict period, we focus on the strategic setting after the war and how that affects the joint force, especially the USAF. It is important to remember, however, that each war would produce many other important outcomes, such as civilian casualties, destruction of infrastructure, and major economic effects. The war would likely also have effects on the joint force in ways we do not detail in this report, such as recruitment and personnel policies.

A Note on Nuclear Escalation

Wars between nuclear-armed states have been rare, which scholars partly attribute to fears that such wars carry the risk of escalation to the nuclear level.⁴² Because there have been very few wars between nuclear powers, it is difficult to assess the likelihood that a war between the

⁴² On the interaction between nuclear weapons and war, see Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020; Mark S. Bell and Nicholas L. Miller, “Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2015; Robert Rauchhaus, “Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis: A Quantitative Approach,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2009; Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989; and Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better,” *Adelphi Papers*, Vol. 21, No. 171, 1981. For a summary of alternative views on how nuclear doctrine and arsenal choices affect the risk of war, see Paul K. Davis, J. Michael Gilmore, David R. Frelinger, Edward Geist, Christopher K. Gilmore, Jenny Oberholtzer, and Danielle C. Tarraf, *Exploring the Role Nuclear Weapons Could Play in Deterring Russian Threats to the Baltic States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2781-RC, 2019.

United States and a great power rival would escalate to a limited nuclear exchange or even strategic nuclear war.

In this section, we briefly discuss how a great power war could stay below the threshold of a strategic nuclear exchange and why exploring such scenarios is thus analytically valuable. We then discuss the ways in which conflicts might instead escalate to a strategic exchange. These pathways weigh on the minds and shape the choices of decisionmakers in our scenarios, the way we assume they will in any future great power war. We add this discussion here as a reminder to readers that the scenarios we outline could culminate—as could any other great power war—in a devastating strategic nuclear war rather than the more-limited wars we focus on in this report.

How a Great Power War Could Stay Conventional

The scenarios we develop in this report consider pathways in which conflicts could stay limited. In these scenarios, we focus on how the anticipated devastating consequences of a strategic nuclear exchange lead nuclear-armed states to constrain the way they fight and make choices within war that reduce the likelihood of nuclear escalation. For example, states might avoid striking one another's nuclear forces or signal their red lines through nuclear threats to dissuade the other side from crossing them. States also might avoid nuclear use of their own to reduce the risk of a nuclear response from an adversary. There is significant evidence that the United States' contemporary great power adversaries seek to delay or avoid using even NSNWs rather than using them early in a conflict (as the Soviets anticipated during the Cold War).⁴³ New technologies and strategic threats have also contributed to a significant reduction over the past five decades in the role that nuclear weapons play in U.S. war planning.⁴⁴

⁴³ On Soviet nuclear warfighting concepts, see John A. Battilega, "Soviet Views of Nuclear Warfare: The Post-Cold War Interviews," in Henry Sokolski, ed., *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2004; and Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *A Cardboard Castle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact, 1955–1991*, Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2005. On contemporary Russian and Chinese concepts, see Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Jeffrey Edmonds, Kasey Stricklin, Dmitry Gorenburg, Katherine Baughman, and Mary Chestnut, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev, April 13, 2020; Dmitry Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*, Paris, France: Ifri Security Studies Center, 2015; Nikolai Sokov, "Nuclear Weapons in Russian National Security Strategy," in Stephen J. Blank, ed., *Russian Nuclear Weapons: Past, Present, and Future*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011; Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2019; Eric Heginbotham, Michael S. Chase, Jacob L. Heim, Bonny Lin, Mark Cozad, Lyle J. Morris, Christopher P. Twomey, Forrest E. Morgan, Michael Nixon, Cristina L. Garafola, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1628-AF, 2017; and Alison A. Kaufman and Daniel M. Hartnett, *Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, February 2016.

⁴⁴ The United States fields far fewer NSNWs today than it did during the Cold War, suggesting that the United States is less likely to employ these weapons to achieve military objectives; Amy F. Woolf, *Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL32572, May 4, 2020a.

States also might be more likely to propose or accept terms that end a conflict before nuclear weapons are used. For example, in the 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, the Soviet Union grew increasingly frustrated with China's refusal to enter negotiations and issued increasingly stark nuclear threats.⁴⁵ The apparent credibility of these threats—which made Chinese leaders increasingly fear that the Soviet Union would actually use nuclear weapons—helped compel Beijing to the negotiating table.⁴⁶ The second war between nuclear-armed adversaries (the Indo-Pakistani Kargil War three decades later) also ended without nuclear use, but the dangers of escalation weighed heavily on Islamabad and New Delhi alike and shaped each side's approach to conventional warfighting and war termination strategies.⁴⁷

It is therefore plausible that future great power wars would remain conventional. However, future wars might also reach a level of intensity or involve political stakes more likely to provoke nuclear use than has occurred so far in the limited history of conflicts between nuclear states. There are at least three pathways through which future wars, such as those we describe in this report, could escalate to the nuclear level. We discuss those pathways next.

How Nuclear Escalation Could Occur

The use of nuclear weapons in a future great power war could result from accidental, inadvertent, or deliberate nuclear escalation.⁴⁸ *Accidental escalation* results from unintended and unwanted mistakes, such as human error or mechanical failure that could result in the detonation of strategic nuclear weapons.⁴⁹ Such mistakes can happen in peacetime, but they might be more likely in wartime if forces are put on a heightened state of alert. *Inadvertent nuclear escalation* occurs when a belligerent takes an action that unintentionally transgresses an adversary's thresholds for use of nuclear weapons. For example, a state might launch strikes that it thinks are relatively unremarkable in the context of a high-intensity war—such as attacking air defense

⁴⁵ Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, CRM D0022974.A2/Final, 2010.

⁴⁶ John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, Vol. 2006, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006; Gerson, 2010.

⁴⁷ John H. Gill, "Provocation, War and Restraint Under the Nuclear Shadow: The Kargil Conflict 1999," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 5, 2019; Benjamin S. Lambeth, "Airpower in India's 1999 Kargil War," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2012; Robert Jervis, "Kargil, Deterrence, and International Relations Theory," in Peter R. Lavoy, ed., *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Sumit Ganguly, "Nuclear Stability in South Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2008; Sumit Ganguly and R. Harrison Wagner, "India and Pakistan: Bargaining in the Shadow of Nuclear War," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2004; Shaukat Qadir, "An Analysis of the Kargil Conflict 1999," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 147, No. 2, 2002.

⁴⁸ This analysis is largely based on a previous RAND study of escalation dynamics and mechanisms (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, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-614-AF, 2008).

⁴⁹ Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993; Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety*, New York: Penguin Books, 2013.

systems—but that the adversary perceives as preparations for a decapitation strike. Inadvertent escalation is more likely if a state is cynical regarding its adversary’s intentions and feels that its own nuclear forces or nuclear command and control (C2) systems are vulnerable.⁵⁰

Finally, *deliberate nuclear escalation* could occur if a state intentionally uses nuclear weapons to achieve a military objective or to signal to an opponent the risks of continuing the war or fighting in particular ways.⁵¹ A state is more likely to deliberately escalate to the nuclear level if it believes that the consequences of defeat are intolerable—for example, regime change, territorial dismemberment, or occupation. Deliberate nuclear escalation is also more likely if a state believes that limited nuclear use is unlikely to trigger an unlimited strategic exchange.⁵² However, a state could mistakenly believe that it has more control over the risk of nuclear escalation than it really does. It might misperceive its adversary’s escalation thresholds, political resolve, military strategy, or worldview—or it might simply subscribe to an inherently flawed theory of escalation management.⁵³

There are thus no guarantees that the kinds of limited nuclear use described in some scenarios in this report would stay limited. The same escalatory pathways that can result in nuclear first use—accidents, inadvertent pressures, or deliberate choices—can also result in a limited nuclear exchange growing into an unlimited nuclear war.

Report Outline

The next four chapters present our hypothetical war scenarios. In Chapter 2, we describe a scenario in which China carefully executes a plan to invade Taiwan, and succeeds in conquering the island. China controls the initiation of the conflict, and although the fighting that results—including extensive U.S. intervention—is challenging, China is able to capture Taipei after eight months. When the United States and remaining Taiwanese forces signal they intend to fight on,

⁵⁰ The foundational work on inadvertent escalation is Barry R. Posen, “Inadvertent Nuclear War? Escalation and NATO’s Northern Flank,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1982. For examples of recent studies on the risk of inadvertent escalation, see Joshua Rovner, “Two Kinds of Catastrophe: Nuclear Escalation and Protracted War in Asia,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 2017; Caitlin Talmadge, “Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2017; and Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2017.

⁵¹ Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, New York: Routledge, 2019; Colin S. Gray, “Nuclear Strategy: The Case for a Theory of Victory,” *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1979.

⁵² Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *Coercive Nuclear Campaigns in the 21st Century: Understanding Adversary Incentives and Options for Nuclear Escalation*, Monterey, Calif.: U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, 2013-001, January 2013; John K. Warden, *Limited Nuclear War: The 21st Century Challenge for the United States*, Livermore, Calif.: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Center for Global Security Research, 2018.

⁵³ For example, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017; Ralph K. White, “Misperception and War,” *Peace and Conflict*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2004; and Richard K. Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2000.

however, China—exhausted by the war and the effects of a U.S. distant blockade—conducts a nuclear demonstration to signal its willingness to escalate the conflict further, and the two sides agree to a cease-fire shortly thereafter that leaves China in complete control of the island. In the aftermath of the war, China invests heavily to consolidate its control over Taiwan and rebuild damage both on the mainland and in Taiwan. However, China's success, and the U.S. defeat, in the conflict sharply escalates concerns throughout the Indo-Pacific region regarding China's capabilities and intentions. Japan, notably, rapidly develops its own nuclear weapons program. The United States, despite having lost substantial capabilities during the war, is able to bring about the first true multilateral security alliance in Asia committed to the containment of further Chinese aggression involving most of its remaining allies. China therefore achieves a notable, long-sought victory but pays a substantial strategic price in doing so.

Chapter 3 describes a scenario in which Chinese gray-zone activities intended to coerce Japan into ceding its claims in the East China Sea result in war. The United States intervenes to assist its ally, and the conflict escalates into a large-scale air and naval conflict in the Western Pacific. Under these conditions, the United States decides to expand its war aims beyond defending Japan's claims to include broadly degrading Chinese military power as a way to prevent future aggression. After roughly four months of fighting, the mounting damage from U.S. strikes convinces Russia of the need to enter the war to prevent a more decisive U.S. victory that could sharply alter the global balance of power. Russian entry, and U.S. concerns about further escalation, lead to a cease-fire shortly thereafter. Following the conflict, Chinese anger at the U.S. expansion of war aims proves irreconcilable. China dramatically increases its military spending and agrees to a mutual defense pact with Russia that heightens concerns among U.S. allies and partners in Europe. In Asia, China proves increasingly willing to use its economic leverage to compel states to end or limit security relationships with the United States. The United States remains more militarily powerful than China in Asia for several years after the conflict, but the long-term effects of China's emerging defense buildup (along with increasing challenges to U.S. military access and partnership opportunities) leave U.S. military planners increasingly concerned for the future.

Chapter 4 describes a different Taiwan scenario, in which China attacks Taiwan without being fully prepared after unanticipated Taiwanese political developments. China begins the conflict with an attempted blockade of Taiwan, followed by extensive air and missile strikes on the island designed to compel Taipei to renounce any movement toward independence. The United States, however, intervenes in force, and over roughly three months of hard fighting is able to inflict substantial damage on Chinese naval and air assets and to impose a blockade of its own on the mainland. China concludes that its strategy is unlikely to change Taiwanese behavior and that it is no longer capable of guaranteeing the success of an amphibious invasion. China therefore contents itself with the conquest of Taiwan's offshore islands and agrees to a cease-fire. In the tense period that follows, both sides view the risk of a return to conflict as being high and prepare accordingly. The United States retains military forces on Taiwan. Taipei shifts

toward a “porcupine” strategy, focusing on investments in hardened infrastructure and survivable forces with short-range weapons to make conquest difficult. China invests heavily in the capabilities needed to ensure the success of an amphibious assault in the face of U.S. intervention, but also assesses that this intensive focus on Taiwan comes with fiscal and strategic opportunity costs that are not sustainable over the long term. It therefore resolves to settle the Taiwan issue on its terms at the earliest opportunity. When a pro-independence Democratic People’s Party (DPP) candidate wins the 2028 Taiwanese presidential election, Beijing begins to mobilize its forces and invades the island in early 2029, less than four years after the prior war began.

The next chapter focuses on U.S.-Russia conflict. Chapter 5 describes a scenario in which Russia mistakenly interprets NATO steady-state activities as a prelude to seizing Kaliningrad. Russia conducts preemptive strikes on key military sites throughout Europe, leading to a large-scale air and missile conflict throughout the continent for several weeks. As damage mounts on all sides, Russia becomes concerned that its own losses are becoming too great to sustain. Russia first threatens and then conducts an NSNW strike on U.S. naval targets. When the United States retaliates with further conventional strikes, Russia conducts additional NSNW strikes on U.S. and NATO targets in the UK, Poland, Lithuania, and Germany. The United States responds with an NSNW strike on a Russian military base, and both sides agree to a cease-fire to avoid escalation to strategic nuclear use. All participants to the conflict are shaken by the degree of escalation that occurred. In the aftermath, Russia and NATO agree to limitations on their forces across a wide area that takes in Kaliningrad, Belarus, the Baltic States, and Poland, allowing no outside forces in these countries and strict limits on Russian forces in Kaliningrad. Germany, upset at U.S. decisionmaking during the war that it feels resulted in the Russian nuclear strikes, demands that all U.S. forces leave its territory within a year. Poland, feeling abandoned by the limits on outside forces on its territory, begins its own nuclear weapons program and turns more sharply toward authoritarianism, leading to increased tensions with Western European states. After several years, Russia also feels increasingly dissatisfied, fearing that Kaliningrad is increasingly vulnerable and Belarus is increasingly Western-leaning, and begins to consider steps to violate the agreement.

The report concludes with a discussion in Chapter 6 about some of the insights for planners that emerged from these hypothetical scenarios, such as patterns that were observed across scenarios with implications for future wargames or planning. We also provide a limited number of recommendations.

2. China Annexes Taiwan

NOTE: This report was finalized in January 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has not been subsequently updated.

In 2027, in response to Taiwanese steps toward independence, U.S. preparations to defend Taiwan, and a U.S.-led blockade on China, China invaded Taiwan and attacked U.S. forces in the region, touching off a devastating and lengthy conflict.⁵⁴ After eight months of intense fighting, which included strikes on both the U.S. and Chinese homelands and widespread economic devastation, China succeeded in invading Taiwan and conquering Taipei. Moreover, it detonated a nuclear weapon in the Pacific in an effort to compel the United States to accept Chinese gains and stop fighting. The effort succeeded, and the two sides agreed to a cease-fire, de facto ratifying the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s control over Taiwan. The cease-fire lacked any broader political settlement that could have eased relations going forward, however. China's victory was assured by being able to launch an invasion at a time of its choosing and by operational effectiveness that was better than U.S. analysts had expected based on China's lack of recent combat experience.

In the postwar period, the PRC behaved cautiously, seeking primarily to address domestic stability and the economic damage wrought by the war and gradually to acclimatize the world to PRC control over Taiwan. China loomed as a larger threat for some states, however, and many took steps to enhance their own defenses. These steps included increases in military spending and, for Japan and South Korea, the pursuit of nuclear weapons programs. The United States reacted to its defeat by paring back its commitments elsewhere in the world and redoubling its efforts to ensure the defense of its allies in Asia, determined to prevent Chinese hegemony of East Asia that could fundamentally alter the global balance of power. Political and economic relations between the United States and China remained strained for years, forcing other states to make difficult choices in an increasingly divided international system.

This scenario explores the implications of issues that could arise during the conflict—for example, limitations in U.S. access to allied and partner territory, a nuclear demonstration, a blockade of China, and kinetic and nonkinetic attacks on both the PRC and U.S. homelands. The remainder of this chapter is divided into four sections. We first provide a chronological narrative of the conflict, then a brief overview of the postwar period. After that, we provide a more detailed examination of key strategic outcomes, and we conclude with a discussion of implications for the joint force.

⁵⁴ As mentioned in Chapter 1, the text of each scenario describes a hypothetical conflict in chronological order as if it has already occurred.

Conflict Narrative

In this section, we describe the events of the conflict scenario.

War Initiation and Stakes

Because of the high costs and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. defense budget declined somewhat in the early 2020s.⁵⁵ However, these cuts were not accompanied by any change to U.S. commitments and posture in Asia. A defense review after the pandemic reinforced the 2018 NDS emphasis on preparations for great power war and placed even greater emphasis on the possibility of war with China. In Taiwan, also called the Republic of China (ROC), the perception that the Taiwanese government had handled the outbreak in a more effective manner than the government on the mainland reinforced local pro-independence attitudes.

In 2027, Taiwan took steps that appeared to lay the groundwork for a declaration of independence. China immediately began preparations for military action to achieve unification with Taiwan. None of these steps was particularly dramatic individually, but the stakes were high for Beijing: The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership viewed the prevention of Taiwan's independence as central to the CCP's legitimacy.⁵⁶ Because movements toward independence were taking place gradually, China was able to prepare and launch an attack at a time of its choosing. China hoped to achieve a quick, decisive victory over Taiwan before the United States could bring substantial forces to bear but believed it could win even if it had to fight the United States.⁵⁷

U.S. leaders believed that a failure to intervene in defense of Taiwan could embolden Beijing to take further aggressive actions against its other neighbors. The American public rallied behind Washington's decision to defend democratic Taiwan against China, understanding that this would be a costly fight against a powerful near-peer competitor.

Chinese Air and Missile Attacks and U.S. Blockade

Under the guise of a major exercise, China finalized preparations to launch an invasion of Taiwan. After initially misinterpreting Chinese intent to invade Taiwan, the United States began flowing additional air and naval forces into the Western Pacific and dispersed aircraft to a larger

⁵⁵ For a prediction along these lines, see Daniel Egel, Howard J. Shatz, Krishna B. Kumar, and Ted Harshberger, "Defense Budget Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *RealClearDefense*, April 7, 2020.

⁵⁶ For the importance of Taiwan to CCP legitimacy, see State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press, July 2019; and Shou Xiaosong [寿晓松], ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], 3rd ed., Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013.

⁵⁷ Such confidence is apparent within PLA publications. For example, see Zhang Tian [张天], "Winning the Battlefield to Target the Enemy [胜战准星要对准强敌]," *China Military Online Comprehensive* [中国军网综合], 2019.

number of small bases to reduce vulnerability to People's Liberation Army (PLA) missiles.⁵⁸ However, the Philippines rejected U.S. basing requests, which limited U.S. options.⁵⁹ See Figure 2.1 for context.

Figure 2.1. Map of East Asia



SOURCE: Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*, website, 2021.

The United States privately warned Taiwan to moderate its policies to avoid war. However, believing that U.S. military preparations indicated a strong commitment to Taiwan's defense, Taipei did not back down.⁶⁰ Beijing issued an ultimatum demanding that Taiwan renounce any intentions toward independence within three days, and declared a 100-km air and maritime exclusion zone around Taiwan. When the deadline arrived with no concession forthcoming from Taiwan, China initiated an escalating series of missile strikes on ROC forces. As the attacks

⁵⁸ For a discussion of Air Force concepts for moving aircraft to distributed bases in wartime, see Miranda Priebe, Alan J. Vick, Jacob L. Heim, and Meagan L. Smith, *Distributed Operations in a Contested Environment: Implications for USAF Force Presentation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2959-AF, 2019.

⁵⁹ We assume in this scenario that the Philippines does not allow U.S. access because it fears economic or military retaliation (U.S. Naval Institute, "Philippines Overview," *Military Periscope*, April 2020).

⁶⁰ For a discussion of this dynamic among allies generally, see Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 1984.

began, Beijing warned other countries not to interfere in what it described as a matter of internal Chinese security.

Recognizing that it could do little in the short term to prevent China from bombarding Taiwan with ballistic missiles, the United States announced a distant blockade on China.⁶¹ Waterborne commercial shipping into China was dramatically reduced as private companies were reluctant to risk violating a U.S. blockade or put civilian crews in harm's way in the vicinity of the conflict. The United States also announced that it was prepared to defend Taiwan against invasion and began covertly inserting special operations forces (SOFs) onto the island.

Chinese Invasion and U.S. Efforts to Stop It

China launched an amphibious invasion after seven days of missile and air strikes on Taiwan. Large flotillas set sail toward beaches at the northern and central sections of Taiwan's western coast.⁶² A Chinese airmobile assault seized the Penghu Islands in the Taiwan Strait to use as a firebase for PLA surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and long-range rocket artillery and to support follow-on airmobile and air assault missions on the main island of Taiwan. Having decided that U.S. intervention was inevitable, China simultaneously launched ballistic and cruise missile attacks against U.S. air bases on Okinawa, Yap, Palau, and Guam. These strikes saturated U.S. missile defenses and inflicted substantial damage to runways; ramps; and petroleum, oil, and lubricant storage areas. The U.S. prewar policy of *hardening* (making air bases more resilient) and developing concepts for distributed air operations meant that air operations were able to continue in spite of these attacks. However, the USAF still faced higher casualty rates on the ground than in any other post-Cold War conflict. Anti-ship ballistic missile attacks against the two carrier strike groups (CSGs) in the region temporarily disabled one U.S. carrier. China also conducted a series of nondestructive attacks against U.S. satellites and kinetic strikes against U.S. land-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and C2 satellite control infrastructure.⁶³

⁶¹ For more details on a possible U.S. blockade of China, see Jason Glab, "Blockading China: A Guide," *War on the Rocks*, October 1, 2013; Gabriel Collins, "A Maritime Oil Blockade Against China—Tactically Tempting but Strategically Flawed," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 71, No. 2, 2018; T. X. Hammes, "Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict," *National Defense University Strategic Forum*, No. 278, June 2012; Sean Mirski, "Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct, and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3, February 12, 2013; and Evan B. Montgomery, "Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2013.

⁶² For an open-source analysis of potential invasion points for amphibious landings on Taiwan, see Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia*, Arlington, Va.: Project 2049 Institute, 2017. Invasion scenario analysis can also be found in Ian Easton, Mark Stokes, Cortez A. Cooper, and Arthur Chan, *Transformation of Taiwan's Reserve Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1757-OSD, 2017.

⁶³ Analysis of Chinese concepts for space warfare is available in Dean Cheng, "Space and Information Warfare: A Key Battleground for Information Dominance," in Nicholas Wright, ed., *Outer Space: Earthly Escalation? Chinese Perspectives on Space Operations and Escalation*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense Strategic Multilayer Assessment Program, August 2018. For information regarding U.S. ground-based space infrastructure in the Indo-

Angered, though not surprised, by the Chinese attacks, the United States began attacking the Chinese invasion force and sought a formal declaration of war. Japan, believing Chinese control of Taiwan would threaten Japanese security, fully supported the U.S. effort, offering complete access to its air bases and committing its own forces to the fight.⁶⁴ Australia also supported the U.S. campaign and allowed U.S. combat operations from bases in northern Australia, although its own forces did not become directly involved in offensive operations.⁶⁵ Other U.S. allies in the region were hesitant, however. South Korea only permitted limited U.S. access for noncombat forces because of concerns about Chinese retaliation and a sense that China's ambitions in Taiwan did not affect South Korea's interests.⁶⁶ Thailand refused U.S. access entirely, assessing that its growing political and military ties with China were more important than relations with the United States.⁶⁷ Among U.S. allies in Europe, only the UK contributed to the military operations, deploying F-35s to defend Australian and Singaporean airspace.

U.S. attack submarines at either end of the Taiwan Strait engaged Chinese ships as they approached Taiwanese waters, while carrier-based fighters and USAF bombers targeted the

Pacific, see U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Satellite Control: Long-Term Planning and Adoption of Commercial Practices Could Improve DOD's Operations*, Washington, D.C., April 2013.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of why Japan views Taiwan as a security interest, see Scott W. Harold, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Gregory Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, *The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation: Deepening Defense Ties Among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3125-MCF, 2019.

⁶⁵ Australia views U.S. military ties as the centerpiece of its defense policy. Australian documents note economic opportunities in a relationship with China but also the need for China to reassure other countries about its intentions (Australian Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, Canberra, 2020a). For recent increases in U.S.-Australia cooperation that reflect this orientation, see Andrew Greene, "South China Sea Tensions Rise as Australian Frigate Exercises with US Ships," Australian Broadcasting Corporation, April 21, 2020; Colin Packham, "Australia, United States Begin Their Biggest Military Exercise," Reuters, June 29, 2017; and Ian Chua, "Singapore, Australia Expand Military Cooperation in \$1.7 Billion Deal," Reuters, May 5, 2016.

⁶⁶ We assume that South Korea's decision to minimize its involvement involved competing considerations. For a discussion of South Korean fears of both U.S. abandonment and entrapment, see Gian Gentile, Yvonne K. Crane, Dan Madden, Timothy M. Bonds, Bruce W. Bennett, Michael J. Mazarr, and Andrew Scobell, *Four Problems on the Korean Peninsula: North Korea's Expanding Nuclear Capabilities Drive a Complex Set of Problems*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, TL-271-A, 2019; Audrye Wong, *Comparisons of the Alliance Thinking in Japan and South Korea as a Reflection of National Identity*, Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2016; and Ian Storey, *Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength*, Singapore: ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, ISEAS Perspective, Vol. 2019, No. 43, May 2019.

⁶⁷ Poongohisoot Busbarat, "Bamboo Swirling in the Wind: Thailand's Foreign Policy Imbalance Between China and the United States," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 2, August 2016. For a general discussion of the factors that affect decisions about entry into a conflict, see Kelly M. Kadera, "Transmission, Barriers, and Constraints: A Dynamic Model of the Spread of War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1998. The empirical record provides evidence that alliance commitments are fulfilled roughly 75 percent of the time (Brett Ashley Leeds, "Alliance Reliability in Times of War: Explaining State Decisions to Violate Treaties," *International Organization*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 2003).

invasion flotillas with Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles (LRASMs).⁶⁸ Together with missile fire from Taiwan's few surviving mobile coast defense batteries and naval combatants, these attacks disabled or sank scores of Chinese ships but were not sufficient to prevent the invasion force from delivering enough PLA forces to establish beachheads on Taiwan. Similarly, Tomahawk Land-Attack Missile (TLAM) attacks against facilities at the Chinese invasion port complexes inflicted damage but did not substantially delay embarkation of subsequent forces. F-22 fighters flying long-range missions from the Marianas shot down several PRC aircraft, as did Taiwanese mobile SAMs, but the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF)'s numerical superiority meant that China's ability to fly sorties over the island was rarely interrupted.⁶⁹

Once ashore, PLA forces faced more-effective resistance than Chinese planners had expected, partly because military reforms begun in the ROC Army since 2021 proved effective.⁷⁰ China's targeting was complicated by Taiwan's investments in survivable capabilities, such as fast-attack craft that could hide in small ports, mobile land-attack and coastal defense cruise missiles, and mobile air defense systems.⁷¹ Beijing was also surprised by the enemy's willingness to fight in the face of heavy losses. U.S. investments in more-resilient air base infrastructure and distributed air operations from a larger number of airfields also complicated Chinese targeting. However, U.S. aircraft and personnel still faced heavy losses on the ground.

The invaders made faster progress in the center of Taiwan than they did in the north, which was much more heavily defended and where China suffered heavier losses as a result. In response to the progress of the invasion (and to bombers and carrier-based fighters having quickly expended the available LRASM inventory in the theater),⁷² U.S. airpower shifted its focus from striking PLA amphibious forces to striking PLA ground forces on the island. This

⁶⁸ Modeling of U.S. submarine combat patrols intended to defeat People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) forces conducting amphibious operations against Taiwan that is consistent with the broad contours of undersea operations described in this scenario is available in Heginbotham et al., 2015.

⁶⁹ The PLAAF fields around 1,700 combat aircraft, making it the largest air force in the region. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency assesses that the PLAAF continues to close the gap with Western air forces. It will likely become a "majority fourth-generation force within the next several years" and begin to deploy more-advanced fifth-generation fighters. However, it is unlikely to field more-modern bomber aircraft prior to 2025. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, Washington, D.C., 2019b.

⁷⁰ For more on these plans in Taiwan's defense strategy, see Drew Thompson, "Hope on the Horizon: Taiwan's Radical New Defense Concept," *War on the Rocks*, October 2, 2018; William S. Murray, "Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2008; and David A. Shlapak, David T. Orletsky, Toy I. Reid, Murray Scot Tanner, and Barry Wilson, *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-888-SRF, 2009.

⁷¹ On Taiwan's defense strategy, see Thompson, 2018.

⁷² By the end of fiscal year (FY) 2020, the U.S. Navy had acquired 99 LRASMs. Its 2021 budget request called for the purchase of 48 additional LRASMs per year through FY 2024. This scenario assumes that this acquisition program is largely fulfilled, but only a portion of those weapons would be available in theater. U.S. Department of the Navy, *Department of Defense Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Budget Estimates, Navy Justification Book, Weapons Procurement*, Navy, February 2020. Additional information regarding other anti-ship missile systems is available in David B. Larter, "As China Expands Navy, US Begins Stockpiling Ship-Killing Missiles," *DefenseNews*, February 11, 2020.

employed (1) standoff weapons, such as Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSMs) from bombers and fourth-generation fighters; (2) penetrating attacks by F-22s and F-35s; and (3) limited numbers of Precision Strike Missile (PrSM) and Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) missiles fired by Army High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) batteries deployed to the southern Ryukyu Islands, east of Taiwan. The United States was able to effectively contest Chinese control of the air over Taiwan for brief intervals. At other times, PLAAF aircraft and remotely piloted aircraft were able to provide ISR and close air support to Chinese ground forces in large numbers. In the strait, U.S. submarines were effective at sinking Chinese ships, but, even in combination with strikes from other domains, this was not sufficient to disrupt the Chinese invasion. Enough Chinese ships survived to sustain and reinforce the beachheads. Chinese maritime patrol aircraft and other anti-submarine warfare assets significantly hampered U.S. submarine operations. By this time, U.S. SOFs were operating extensively on the island, coordinating with the defenders and directing air strikes. But, with long timelines and high risk of loss, the United States did not try to deploy ground combat forces on Taiwan in quantity.

Expanding Conflict

As the fighting continued, both sides escalated the scope of the conflict.⁷³ Beijing had initially avoided destructive counterspace operations because it did not want to generate orbital debris that would harm Chinese assets along with U.S. ones. Over time, this philosophy changed, and Chinese political and military leaders destroyed dozens of U.S. imagery and communications satellites.⁷⁴ The United States responded by attacking Chinese satellites, generating more debris that threatened commercial and military satellites in low Earth orbit (LEO).⁷⁵

With the conflict expanding, China took steps to deter attacks on its nuclear forces and other strategic targets. It publicized photos of mobile nuclear-capable missiles, and official media quoted anonymous PLA officers who suggested that China might use nuclear weapons in response to attacks against nuclear forces, strategic C2 targets, leadership facilities in and around Beijing, population and economic centers, nuclear power plants, and major hydroelectric power

⁷³ On the general finding that wars at higher levels of intensity and longer duration are more likely to spread geographically, see Alex Braithwaite, “The Geographic Spread of Militarized Disputes,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 43, No. 5, 2006.

⁷⁴ U.S. satellites in higher orbits—including the Global Positioning System (GPS), signals intelligence (SIGINT), and missile warning satellites—would not be affected by these attacks. For analysis of the possible effects of China’s offensive space capabilities, see Heginbotham et al., 2015, pp. 233, 253.

⁷⁵ For discussions of U.S. counterspace capabilities and doctrine, see Heginbotham et al., 2015; USAF, *Counterspace Operations*, Annex 3-14, Washington, D.C., August 27, 2018; and U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Space Operations*, Joint Publication 3-14, Washington, D.C., April 10, 2018a. In this scenario, we assume that the United States has kinetic counterspace capabilities. In doing so, we follow Heginbotham et al., 2015, which speculates on how the United States could use existing capabilities to conduct attacks on adversary satellites.

facilities (such as the Three Gorges Dam). Even before China sent these signals, the United States was already avoiding such targets to avoid provoking nuclear escalation.

U.S. bombers had been very effective in this conflict because of their ability to deliver large amounts of munitions from distant (and thus relatively secure) bases. Therefore, China now launched conventional missile attacks against more-distant U.S. bomber bases in northern Australia and Hawaii, striking the former with waves of air-launched ballistic and cruise missiles from H-6 bombers and the latter with much smaller numbers of submarine-launched cruise missiles. It also mounted cyberattacks against military systems across the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) area of responsibility (AOR).⁷⁶ Chinese cyberattacks against in-theater U.S. logistics and C2 systems had some modest effects, slowing but not preventing U.S. force regeneration efforts.⁷⁷

For its part, the United States expanded its kinetic and nonkinetic attacks on military targets on the Chinese mainland, particularly those associated with naval, ballistic missile, intelligence, and anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities. The United States viewed the strikes as essential to defeating the Chinese invasion but attempted to mitigate the risk of escalation by limiting its attacks to military targets directly related to the invasion campaign. The United States also conducted cyberoperations against Chinese critical infrastructure targets, including financial nodes and communication infrastructure in major urban centers near the Taiwan Strait, causing significant social disruption.

In response to the attacks on Hawaii, the United States called on its NATO allies for assistance. Although the status of Hawaii under the North Atlantic Treaty was ambiguous, the preemptive nature of the initial Chinese attack on U.S. forces, and the formal U.S. declaration of war on China persuaded the allies to back a formal Article V declaration.⁷⁸ Although no allies participated in U.S. operations, some states, including the UK and Canada, provided military

⁷⁶ For more on China's missile inventory (including longer-range missiles that could reach these targets), see Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of China," *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., June 14, 2018a.

⁷⁷ For an open-source analysis of the possible effects of China's cyber capabilities against U.S. military systems, see Heginbotham et al., 2015.

⁷⁸ Article VI of the Washington Treaty delineates the scope of the Article V provision as "the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France, on the territory of Turkey or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer." Whether Hawaii would still qualify for the invocation (given that it is outside these regions) has been discussed in the recent past in some NATO countries (NATO, *The North Atlantic Treaty (1949)*, Brussels, Belgium, 2012; Julian Lewis and Alan Duncan, "Guam and Hawaii: NATO: Written Question—106917," UK Parliament, October 10, 2017; Elie Perot, "The Art of Commitments: NATO, the EU, and the Interplay Between Law and Politics Within Europe's Collective Defence Architecture," *European Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019).

assets—such as Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft for U.S. homeland defense missions, which freed additional U.S. forces to move into the region.⁷⁹

The United States shifted munitions, platforms, and stockpiles from other theaters; increased production of key munitions and systems at existing facilities; and, where possible, asked producers of other materiel to prioritize military needs over other customer needs. Facing no kinetic attacks on its economic centers and being self-sufficient in energy and many other key raw materials, the United States faced substantially fewer disruptions than the PRC.⁸⁰ Although munitions production expanded, particularly as the war dragged on, the United States faced several bottlenecks in surging capacity tied to the complexity of existing platforms and availability of key technical components. Nonetheless, U.S. munitions output outpaced China's in the later stages of the conflict. The risk that the United States could find ways to alleviate these bottlenecks and increase production of advanced munitions even further concerned PRC leaders already worried about the length of the conflict and how it could still turn against them.

As the conflict continued and trade disruptions and Chinese cyberattacks on U.S. infrastructure took a toll on the U.S. domestic economy, the United States moved to more fully isolate China from the world economy. In particular, the United States pressured the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) to cut off access to Chinese banks (removing Chinese access to the international payments system and disrupting nearly all cross-border economic exchange), and largely severing Chinese internet traffic (through both cyberattacks and targeted kinetic operations on key infrastructure).⁸¹ This policy, Chinese attacks on the U.S. infrastructure, and other disruptions caused by the war and blockade caused massive turbulence in the Chinese economy and a global financial crisis.⁸²

⁷⁹ After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, for example, NATO sent an AWACS (NATO, "NATO AWACS," webpage, undated-b). Allies have deployed air and missile defense systems to Turkey in recent years ("Amid S-400 Crisis, France Deploys Missile Defense Battery to Turkey," *Arab News*, July 26, 2019).

⁸⁰ Despite this, the United States faced a potential vulnerability because of its reliance on China's raw materials and mineral commodities (Richard Silberglitt, *Critical Materials and U.S. Import Reliance: Recent Developments and Recommended Actions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-485, 2017).

⁸¹ For a discussion of China's attempts to develop an alternative to SWIFT because of concerns about past U.S. use of SWIFT to enforce sanctions, see Rush Doshi, "China's Ten-Year Struggle Against U.S. Financial Power," National Bureau of Asian Research, January 6, 2020; and Julian Gewirtz, "Look Out: Some Chinese Thinkers Are Girding for a 'Financial War,'" *Politico Magazine*, December 17, 2019. For an extended discussion on how the United States could use global economic markets as a coercive tool in wartime, see Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Summer 2019.

⁸² Potential risks to the financial system attendant to a hypothetical armed conflict that features large-scale cyberattacks on critical infrastructure are discussed in Lincoln Kaffenberger and Emanuel Kopp, *Cyber Risk Scenarios, the Financial System, and Systemic Risk Assessment*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 30, 2019. On the potential financial consequences of major cyberattacks on U.S. critical infrastructure, see Simon J. Ruffle, Eireann Leverett, Andrew Coburn, Jennifer Copic, Scott Kelly, and Tamara Evan, *Business Blackout: The Insurance Implications of a Cyber Attack on the US Power Grid*, London, UK: Lloyds of London and University of Cambridge Centre for Risk Studies, 2015.

The fight for Taiwan increasingly hinged on China's ability to move reinforcements and supplies across the strait quickly enough to build an overwhelming force in the face of losses at sea and ashore. The force flow was increasingly sustained by large numbers of smaller ships to reduce vulnerability to interdiction by U.S. submarines, although the process was chaotic and a frequent target of attack from U.S. and Taiwanese forces. The PLA focused most of its resources on the central front, where the invaders had quickly consolidated their position, splitting most communication and transport arteries of the island in two. The PLA began advancing up the western coastal plain to join with the more-beleaguered northern forces, who encountered heavier resistance and advanced only modestly in the early weeks of the conflict.

Lead elements of the PLA central advance linked up with the northern invasion force as the fourth month of the conflict drew to a close. After months of heavy fighting, the capital was protected mostly by Taiwan's reconstituted and reserve forces, although some regular units remained relatively intact despite being cut off in the south. A U.S. Marine Corps battalion reinforced Taipei's forces, and additional U.S. ground forces continued to deploy in a limited capacity. Standoff munitions were in short supply by this point in the conflict. The United States continued strikes using direct attack weapons in spite of the continued effectiveness of China's integrated air defense system (IADS). The effectiveness of these efforts suffered from the long ranges to battered U.S. operating bases as well.

When the PLA advance turned east toward Taipei, Beijing ordered it to move slowly, giving the Taiwanese government time to accept the inevitability of defeat and to surrender before Taipei was devastated. This slow advance also enabled the PLA to exploit its firepower advantages. It took nearly a month of air, rocket, and missile bombardment of the city's defenses for the ROC defenses to finally crumble and for PLA forces to reach the outskirts of Taipei. The Taiwanese government declared the capital an open city and evacuated into exile along with most U.S. personnel on the island, save for SOFs who stayed behind to organize resistance forces.

China Detonates Nuclear Weapon to End Conflict

Despite having taken the capital, China still faced determined Taiwanese resistance in the south of the island. Chinese international trade had been radically reduced, though overland trade continued from Russia, Pakistan, Laos, and (to a limited extent) Myanmar. The United States had employed sabotage and cyberattacks on systems controlling the pipelines from Russia during the war but without significant success.

Although the United States judged it unlikely that China would capitulate, given the gains it had already realized on the ground, the United States deemed it unpalatable to give up the fight with Taiwanese forces still intact in the south. Believing that economic damage from the ongoing blockade was beginning to affect China's domestic stability and that this would force China to the bargaining table from a position of weakness in the near future, the United States decided that it would continue the fight in support of surviving Taiwanese forces.

After months of accumulated damage, U.S. attacks intended to degrade China's conventional warfighting capabilities inadvertently threatened the reliability and survivability of China's nuclear forces. For example, U.S. attacks damaged China's land-based long-range radar systems, missile transport infrastructure, and some theater-range dual-use missile brigades.⁸³ In response, China put its nuclear forces on higher alert and issued an official statement indicating that U.S. attacks had crossed a line and that attacks on nuclear forces and C2 systems could be met with a nuclear response. Although Chinese commentators had indicated such a possibility earlier in the conflict, this was the first official indication that China might end its no-first-use policy.⁸⁴

Shortly after this announcement, the United States inadvertently sank two of China's ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs)—a significant portion of the latter's undersea deterrent.⁸⁵ As a result, CCP leaders worried that the United States might be attempting to degrade China's nuclear forces to leave it vulnerable to U.S. nuclear coercion.⁸⁶ Moreover, the PLA was rapidly exhausting its ability to prosecute intensive operations on Taiwan, and CCP leaders believed that victory must therefore be seized through a massive show of strength before the window of opportunity closed.⁸⁷ Adding to Beijing's anxiety, internal security forces warned that the economic hardship generated by the unexpectedly long conflict was slowly undermining an initial surge in patriotic support for the regime and could therefore threaten the CCP's hold on power, increasing the urgency to end the conflict quickly and on victorious terms.⁸⁸

⁸³ The dangers of inadvertent escalation associated with the entanglement (or commingling) of Chinese conventional and nuclear forces is discussed in Li Bin and Zhao Tong, "The Underappreciated Risks of Entanglement: A Chinese Perspective," in James M. Acton, ed., *Entanglement: Russian and Chinese Perspectives on Non-Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Risks*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017; and Talmadge, 2017. By 2024, China's nuclear C2 network might be less entangled with conventional military systems; see Cunningham and Fravel, 2019; and Fiona S. Cunningham, *Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications Systems of the People's Republic of China*, NAPSNet Special Reports, July 18, 2019.

⁸⁴ There is an active debate about whether China would actually abandon its no-first-use policy. For the purpose of this scenario, we assume it does (Thomas J. Christensen, "The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China's Strategic Modernization and US-China Security Relations," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2012; Heginbotham et al., 2015; Gregory Kulacki, "Would China Use Nuclear Weapons First in a War with the United States?" *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2020).

⁸⁵ The danger of this occurring is identified by Avery Goldstein, "First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in US-China Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2013.

⁸⁶ U.S. use of an economic blockade may sharpen these fears; see Collins, 2018.

⁸⁷ Oriana Skylar Mastro argues that CCP leaders have believed it necessary to establish China's military superiority, or at least strength, before entering serious peace negotiations. To do so, the PLA has developed a pattern of rapid escalation generally intended to shock or cow their adversaries into an advantageous peace (Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How China Ends Wars: Implications for East Asian and U.S. Security," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2018).

⁸⁸ Chinese commentators have debated for decades about whether the no-first-use policy would restrain Chinese leaders from using nuclear weapons first if they perceived an existential threat to China or the CCP, which could suggest the existence of similar debates within China's political leadership. Bruce G. Blair, "General Zhu and Chinese Nuclear Preemption," *China Security*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2005; Michael S. Chase, "China's Transition to a More Credible Nuclear Deterrent: Implications and Challenges for the United States," *Asia Policy*, Vol. 16, 2013.

Chinese leaders decided that demonstrating China's resolve to use nuclear weapons was the only means of compelling the United States to back down and, paradoxically, to control the risk of further escalation.⁸⁹ Therefore, Beijing fired a ballistic missile on a trajectory over Japan that detonated its single nuclear warhead in the atmosphere several hundred kilometers northeast of Oahu. The location for the detonation was chosen to ensure that it did not damage U.S. population centers, thus reducing the likelihood of triggering a strategic nuclear exchange. The explosion generated electromagnetic interference on the Hawaiian archipelago but otherwise caused minimal local damage.⁹⁰ This nuclear demonstration was followed by a message from Beijing reiterating the need for the United States to accept the new reality of Taiwan's reintegration with the mainland and proposing that the two sides cease military, economic, and cyber hostilities.

The United States, faced with a conflict in which Taipei had already fallen, did not respond with a nuclear strike or demonstration of its own. It continued conventional fighting for a few days following the nuclear detonation, but U.S. leaders ultimately agreed to discuss an end to the conflict, and the two sides agreed to a cease-fire shortly thereafter. Most Taiwanese forces in the south surrendered.

The conventional conflict therefore ended some eight months after China's first missile attacks on Taiwan, with China successfully defeating the U.S. military intervention and achieving unification with Taiwan by force.⁹¹ The U.S. intervention served to substantially delay and increase the costs for the Chinese invasion, but ultimately not to prevent it. The economic effects of the U.S. blockade on China were substantial but ultimately insufficient to persuade China to abandon the advantages it gradually won on the battlefield. China was sobered by the military losses it took, including the bulk of its more-advanced platforms and munitions, but it ultimately accepted these costs to achieve the unification with Taiwan that it had sought since 1949.

U.S. and PRC forces agreed to a cease-fire that featured protocols for the behavior and operations of armed forces in the vicinity of Taiwan to limit the risk of an inadvertent restart of conflict. There was not a broader agreement to settle differences or to manage escalation risks in

⁸⁹ For studies of Chinese views regarding escalation control, see Burgess Laird, *War Control: Chinese Writings on the Control of Escalation in Crisis and Conflict*, Center for New American Security, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2017; Kaufman and Hartnett, February 2016.

⁹⁰ Samuel Glasstone and Philip J. Dolan, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons*, 3rd ed., Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of Energy, 1977; Lionel S. Johns, Peter Sharfman, Jonathan Medalia, Robert W. Vining, Kevin Lewis, Gloria Proctor, Henry Kelly, and Marvin Ott, *The Effects of Nuclear War*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979; National Coordinating Center for Communications, *Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) Protection and Resilience Guidelines for Critical Infrastructure and Equipment*, Arlington, Va.: National Cybersecurity and Communications Integration Center, February 5, 2019.

⁹¹ It is not unusual for states that are more powerful, on net, to lose wars. This can happen, as in this case, when the weaker country cares more about the outcome and is therefore willing to risk greater escalation. The location of a conflict and local balance of power can also play a role (Zeev Maoz, "Resolve, Capabilities, and the Outcomes of Interstate Disputes, 1816–1976," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1983).

other areas, such as the South China Sea. The United States did not recognize China's conquest of Taiwan by force as legitimate, nor did most major states in the world (other than Russia and Iran). The fate of economic relations between Taiwan and the rest of the world remained uncertain at the close of the conflict.

The entry of the United States and several of its allies into the war contributed to its intensity and length, making it more difficult to identify a settlement that could have ended the conflict.⁹² Both sides suffered heavy losses in the war, although U.S. personnel casualties were far lower than those of the other combatants. Large portions of China's navy were destroyed—on the order of 60 percent of its modern surface and subsurface fleet—and the PLAAF lost more than one-third of its fourth- and burgeoning fifth-generation fighter and bomber inventory. The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF)'s inventories of short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles and long-range ground-launched cruise missiles were severely depleted, and the defense industrial capacity to regenerate missiles was degraded. The PLA invasion force suffered heavy casualties, some 30,000–35,000 killed or seriously wounded. Casualties across the PLA joint force exceeded 45,000.⁹³

The United States lost substantial portions of its advanced air and naval assets, which bore the brunt of combat operations during the conflict. Roughly 450 aircraft were destroyed—the majority on the ground—including some 75 F-22s, more than 200 F-35s, and approximately 30 tanker aircraft. U.S. ships were also lost: three nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), four destroyers, and two aircraft carriers suffered damage that rendered them combat ineffective and forced them to return to the West Coast for repairs. Losses to U.S. personnel on the ground were more limited—partly because of the limited role that U.S. ground forces played in the conflict and partly because of efforts to distribute basing (and therefore PRC targets) throughout the region. Thus, total U.S. casualties remained low (at roughly 4,000) compared with those of the other major combatants. Taiwanese military losses were heavy, with more than 50,000 killed; most Taiwanese military units suffered severe damage throughout the course of the war. Japanese forces assisting the United States were involved primarily in defense of the Japanese homeland and U.S. forces operating from there, but Japan did suffer losses, with Chinese bomber attacks destroying a Japanese maritime ballistic missile defense surface action group. Japan also

⁹² On the general tendency for wars with more combatants to last longer for these reasons, see Zachary C. Shirkey, "When and How Many: The Effects of Third Party Joining on Casualties and Duration in Interstate Wars," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 2012.

⁹³ In general, wars that touch on nationalism (as would be the case here for both China and Taiwan) tend to lead to greater mobilization; more-intense fighting; and, ultimately, greater casualties in the conflict (Lars-Erik Cederman, T. Camber Warren, and Didier Sornette, "Testing Clausewitz: Nationalism, Mass Mobilization, and the Severity of War," *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2011). In the absence of open-source modeling for this scenario, we arrived at estimates based on likely attrition rates for high-intensity combat between the main forces that China and the United States would bring to bear over the course of a six- to eight-month conflict—particularly a conflict that would register as existential for China and therefore involve full national mobilization. For the types and number of forces that would likely be involved and a rough correlation of forces, see Heginbotham et al., 2015; and Easton et al., 2017.

lost two submarines while prosecuting Chinese naval combatant targets north of the Taiwan Strait. The Japanese Air Self Defense Force lost 10 percent of its F-35 fleet while conducting defensive combat air patrols (CAPs) in support of U.S. air operations.

Civilian casualties in mainland China and other affected countries outside Taiwan (such as those housing military installations in the United States, Japan, and Australia) were limited, in the low thousands. All parties had clear incentives to avoid unnecessary damage: to court world opinion, to avoid political and diplomatic blowback, and to abide by targeting constraints imposed by the laws of war. Precision munitions also enabled relatively accurate strikes—particularly early in the conflict, when such munitions were more plentiful—although targeting mistakes were still made on all sides. On Taiwan, the civilian toll was grimmer. Although efforts were made to evacuate civilians from conflict areas, several months of high-intensity ground fighting, along with resulting disruptions to food, health, and other services, resulted in a civilian death toll in the tens of thousands.

Narrative of Post-Conflict Developments

In the aftermath of the war, the PRC took a measured approach to its foreign policy, focusing on broadening acceptance of its acquisition of Taiwan, reestablishing economic relations, and attempting to prevent the emergence of a strong balancing coalition against it. China was also increasingly inwardly focused as it attempted to reestablish domestic stability in the wake of the extensive damage that the conflict and blockade imposed on the Chinese economy; at the same time, it needed to undertake a massive reconstruction project on the island of Taiwan. In the wake of postwar pacification efforts across Taiwan, Beijing faced lingering hostility among prodemocracy groups and activists; this led to occasional violent uprisings that required intervention of People's Armed Police forces and Ministry of Public Security units brought in from the mainland. The National Security Law enacted earlier for Hong Kong was extended to Taiwan, and there was widespread international condemnation of Beijing's pacification measures.

Although some economic exchange resumed, there was now perceived to be a large "China risk premium" that caused many states and firms to pursue alternatives elsewhere, particularly in Southeast Asia and India. This sense of greater risk in China came from a concern about U.S.-China tensions, the possibility of another war in the next decade, and heightened instability within China as discussed later in this chapter. A prolonged period of recession and slow growth ensued in China.

Despite these internal difficulties, the PRC defeat of the United States highlighted PRC military capabilities and the potential threat that growing Chinese power might pose to its neighbors. Other Asian states with their own territorial disputes with China—particularly Japan and Vietnam—embarked on substantial military buildups of their own. Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), concerned by the apparent success of PRC nuclear coercion of

the United States, pursued their own nuclear weapons programs. States throughout Asia explored closer security ties with one another and were increasingly motivated to try to maintain a strong U.S. role in the region.

Although the United States failed to prevent the PRC conquest of Taiwan and lost significant military assets, the U.S. economic and industrial base remained largely intact, and overall military casualties were relatively limited, particularly compared with the PRC. After the war, the United States doubled down on its broader goal of preventing PRC hegemony over East Asia by strengthening its commitments to such key allies as Japan and Australia (and after difficult negotiations, the ROK) and by proposing a multilateral security organization. This effort culminated in the establishment of the Pacific Alliance Treaty Organization (PATO) in 2029, which by 2030 was made up of the United States, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines.

To enable a focus on security in the Asia-Pacific, the United States was willing to make trade-offs on other issues. The United States removed its objections and tacitly encouraged Japan and the ROK to pursue nuclear weapons programs. Although the United States remained in NATO, the losses it had suffered in the conflict with China significantly reduced its ability and willingness to maintain substantial air and naval forces in Europe or to fight in a European war. Several major European nations substantially increased their own defense capabilities to compensate, both as individual states and through a more robust independent European defense capability coordinated through the European Union (EU).

The global economy struggled to adapt to an increasingly divided postwar environment. The diversion of U.S. and allied economic activity out of China proved to be a boon to India and parts of Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. On the whole, however, global growth was slow and uneven for several years after the conflict because of disruptions in trade and investment patterns, radical reductions in PRC overseas investment resulting from rising domestic needs, and uncertainty regarding the risk of conflict recurrence. International institutions were also increasingly hamstrung as greater U.S. and PRC enmity returned many of them, including the United Nations (UN) Security Council, to the state of paralysis in which they operated during much of the Cold War. Although some sources of international tensions were clearly reduced—including the risk of conflict over Taiwan—rising levels of military spending and the increased proliferation of nuclear weapons enhanced the stakes for a future conflict in the Indo-Pacific that both China and the United States continued to see as a major concern.

Key Issues in the Post-Conflict Environment

This section provides greater detail on the post-conflict environment than the preceding narrative does.

Territorial and Major Domestic Political Change

As a result of the war, Taiwan was no longer an independent political entity. Beijing appointed a governor and party secretary to rule the island and declared the intention to administer Taiwan as Chinese territory with some level of autonomy to respect local interests. In practice, however, the island was granted little autonomy. The United States did not formally accept the conquest of Taiwan as legitimate and continued to host the Taiwanese government-in-exile, but Washington did tacitly recognize the outcome of the conflict in the cease-fire agreement by agreeing not to operate military forces near the island and to respect PRC control over Taiwanese territorial waters.

Mainland Chinese officials and media referred to residents of Taiwan in a positive light, aiming to promote a narrative of national unity. The “Taiwan Provincial” authorities installed by Beijing included some former Taiwan officials and some well-known business leaders, all of whom urged calm while details of long-term Taiwan status were developed between official mainland and Taiwan councils. In response to protests on the island, China generally avoided heavy-handed actions (like those more commonly practiced on its mainland ethnic minorities), but it still employed the People’s Armed Police to enact large-scale detentions of dissenters—specifically, those whom China portrayed as unrepentant separatists bent on undermining Taiwan’s return to stability and prosperity. Eager to avoid large-scale emigration and brain drain, most Taiwan residents were restricted from traveling outside China.

Despite the destructive, costly war, the CCP remained in control of China, but faced several changes in domestic political dynamics. Portrayed as a major victory for the CCP and the Chinese people, China’s victory did initially lend strong domestic support for the CCP (though there were some protests focused on the number of casualties that the PLA suffered during the war—an especially sensitive subject given the one-child policy that had been in place until 2015). Unrest in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang—which had increased during the conflict as China diverted resources toward the war with Taiwan—continued during the postwar period.

In the months following the war, discontent over the costs of the conflict in eastern areas and major cities grew. Economic activity did not return to prewar levels, and the costs of rebuilding the military and of reconstruction on Taiwan sapped resources available for domestic programs. Chinese citizens became weary of the large costs that they were continuing to pay to reintegrate Taiwan. Protests over workers’ rights and corruption (frequent before the war as well) took on a harder edge as dissatisfaction with the direction of the country increased. Beijing’s lack of a clear and effective response led to increased domestic unrest, encouraging a further diversion of resources into domestic surveillance and security, even for Han-majority areas. Although the CCP remained in power, it became clear that its decision to focus inward in the years after the war was not entirely a strategic choice but also a necessary one.

In the years that followed, Beijing invested massive resources in reestablishing its capabilities for domestic repression. Beijing blamed foreign hostile forces for exacerbating the

situation in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Chinese leaders believed the United States was the hidden hand behind unrest in Hong Kong and Xinjiang and blamed India for the hostile situation in Tibet, where the situation became especially tense following the 2029 death of the Dalai Lama. Beijing's choice to crack down on the region led to even greater friction in China's relationship with India.

Effects of Counterspace Operations

Although ASAT attacks were relatively limited and used only against assets in LEO, they still produced tens of thousands of pieces of trackable debris, much of which was expected to remain in LEO for decades or even centuries.⁹⁴ As a result, there was a greater risk of accidental collision between the debris and satellites in LEO in the years after the war, and the satellite industry faced much higher costs and risks, which drove some companies out of business.⁹⁵ Mistrust and deep disagreements between the United States and China prevented development of agreements regulating future military operations in space.⁹⁶

Effects of Cyberspace Operations

The war demonstrated that cyberattacks could have some military utility but fell short of the dramatic effects that some cyber advocates had predicted before the war. China ultimately proved as vulnerable to cyberattack as the United States was. But cyberoperations were not effective instruments of wartime coercion; they were limited in their operational effects and not sufficient in their damage to civilian targets to persuade either side to stop fighting.⁹⁷ Still, the United States and China sought to harden their networks in preparation for a future conflict.

⁹⁴ Recent anti-satellite weapon tests have produced unexpectedly large amounts of debris that has remained in orbit (Frank A. Rose, *Managing China's Rise in Outer Space*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, April 2020; Loren Grush, "More Than 50 Pieces of Debris Remain in Space After India Destroyed Its Own Satellite in March," *The Verge*, August 8, 2019).

⁹⁵ As an illustration of the risk, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Administrator Jim Bridenstein warned that the 2019 Indian ASAT test described in the preceding footnote increased the risk of a collision between the International Space Station and LEO debris by 44 percent in the ten-day period immediately after it (Bill Chappell, "NASA: Debris from India's Anti-Satellite Test Raised Threat to Space Station," NPR, April 2, 2019).

⁹⁶ Efforts to formalize an international space "code of conduct" frequently follow events that generate substantial amounts of orbital debris, including China's 2007 ASAT test. For a discussion of the prospects of arms control in space, see Paul Meyer, "Dark Forces Awaken: The Prospects for Cooperative Space Security," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3–4, 2016. China's vision for a space arms control agreement is presented in Zhongjun Shi, *China's Perspective on the Promotion of Security and Sustainability of Outer Space*, Vienna, Austria: United Nations, Office for Outer Space Affairs, September 5, 2016. The U.S. government's opposition to China's proposals are presented in Christopher Ashley Ford, *Whither Arms Control in Outer Space? Space Threats, Space Hypocrisy, and the Hope of Space Norms*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, April 6, 2020.

⁹⁷ Exploratory works on why coercion could prove hard to effect via cyberspace include Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Deterrence and Dissuasion in Cyberspace," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2017; and Robert Jervis, "Some Thoughts on Deterrence in the Cyber Era," *Journal of Information Warfare*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2016.

China, for example, increased investments to enable a transition of its telecommunications networks to a closed but resilient intranet in times of conflict.⁹⁸

Resulting Distribution of Power

Although China succeeded in achieving its immediate war aim of unification, the war's effect on the distribution of power in Asia was less clear cut. China's victory revealed greater relative military capability on its periphery than U.S. and regional observers had originally predicted. However, China's military losses were proportionately more than U.S. losses. It was clear that China would need to focus on rebuilding its anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capabilities to defend its homeland and would have fewer resources available to invest in power projection capabilities. Therefore, China's wartime victory increased perceptions of its power on its periphery but not in the broader region.

China continued to experience effects of the war in the years that followed. U.S. attacks on infrastructure, domestic instability, and lingering economic effects of the blockade created economic and political hurdles to rebuilding. Although the PLA was able to increase spending and use the island of Taiwan to defend the mainland and project power, several key U.S. allies in the region had also responded by substantially increasing their own military spending. This resulting arms race produced an East Asian balance of power that most analysts assessed to be relatively even (in military terms) by 2030, albeit a costly one in which the United States was increasingly reliant on the capabilities of allies and partners to maintain.

China

The conduct and outcome of the war had several effects on Chinese military investment decisions. First, with the conquest of Taiwan complete, China no longer perceived the need to prepare for a substantial amphibious assault, so many of the transport ships sunk by U.S. forces were not replaced. Second, mindful of the effectiveness of U.S. fifth-generation aircraft during the war, the PLA accelerated its own investments in advanced fighters and air defense capabilities, seeking to close the qualitative edge with the United States and achieve and maintain a clear quantitative edge. Third, the escalation of the conflict in the space and nuclear domains led to increased investments in redundant or resilient satellite and other ISR capabilities, ASAT weapons, and more-robust, survivable nuclear C2 capabilities. Fourth, the heavy toll that U.S. undersea capabilities took on Chinese naval vessels during the conflict led to a sharp increase in anti-submarine warfare capability investments. Fifth, although the PLAN sought to replace much of the surface fleet it lost in the conflict, the greater focus on homeland defense

⁹⁸ Beijing promotes "internet sovereignty" as a crucial national goal and has already made substantial investments in territorializing the networks accessible to within China. See Zeng Jinghan, Tim Stevens, and Yaru Chen, "China's Solution to Global Cyber Governance: Unpacking the Domestic Discourse of 'Internet Sovereignty,'" *Politics & Policy*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2017; and William J. Drake, Cerf G. Vinton, and Wolfgang Kleinwächter, *Internet Fragmentation: An Overview*, Cologne, Switzerland: World Economic Forum, January 2016.

meant that the PLAN did not seek to dramatically expand its blue-water capabilities. Sixth, the PLA spent heavily on basing and air defense systems for Taiwan in an effort to make any U.S. attempt to push the PRC off the island unthinkable, while turning the island into a formidable avenue for power projection throughout the Western Pacific.

The economic foundation on which greater PRC military power was based was weakened. Although China remained the world's second largest economy, the PRC had to divert significant resources toward pacifying Taiwan, reestablishing control in separatist regions, and rebuilding its damaged infrastructure and economy. Taiwan's previous economic relationships, investments, and trade patterns with the United States and its allies were fundamentally disrupted by the war, and replacements outside mainland China were slow to develop as some states were hesitant to add legitimacy to the PRC conquest, leading to a lagging reconstruction and continued drain on PRC coffers for years afterward. These negative trends were exacerbated by underlying PRC demographic challenges, as China's aging workforce increased demands for social spending.

After the war, some countries in Europe and Asia were quick in their attempts to resume normal economic relations with China. During the eight months of conflict, some companies developed alternative suppliers, resulting in replacement of previous relationships. Moreover, as we describe later in this chapter, the United States and some of its key partners refused to return to business as usual and instead sought to build other trade and investment relationships. Even many neutral countries perceived a greater risk in economic relations with China—both because of another possible war and because of greater postwar domestic repression—making it more difficult for China to attract foreign direct investment and rebuild trade relationships.⁹⁹ Chinese investment overseas, including those related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), were sharply reduced as China redirected most of this capital for internal reconstruction. Although rebuilding efforts offset some of these negative economic effects, China's economy was, on net, negatively affected by the war.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Scholars have consistently demonstrated that military conflict suppresses future trade in general (Andrew G. Long, "Bilateral Trade in the Shadow of Armed Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2008; Omar M. G. Keshk, Brian M. Pollins, and Rafael Reuveny, "Trade Still Follows the Flag: The Primacy of Politics in a Simultaneous Model of Interdependence and Armed Conflict," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 66, No. 4, 2004; Håvard Hegre, John R. Oneal, and Bruce Russett, "Trade Does Promote Peace: New Simultaneous Estimates of the Reciprocal Effects of Trade and Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 47, No. 6, 2010). The primary dissenting opinion has been challenged on empirical grounds (Katherine Barbieri and Jack S. Levy, "Sleeping with the Enemy: The Impact of War on Trade," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 1999).

¹⁰⁰ Scholars have found that although there are some boosts to economic growth from rebuilding after the war, on net, the negative consequences of war can be long-lasting (Steven J. Yamarik, Noel D. Johnson, and Ryan A. Compton, "War! What Is It Good for? A Deep Determinants Analysis of the Cost of Interstate Conflict," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2010; Isa Camyar and Bahar Ulupinar, "War and the Sectoral Distribution of Wealth: Evidence from United States Firms," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2015).

United States

After the war, the United States embarked on an expensive military rebuilding and modernization program to prevent PRC dominance of East Asia. Securing the resources for this program proved to be difficult and controversial. Although infrastructure remained largely intact, the conflict still imposed substantial economic costs through trade disruption and PRC cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. Following the war, the United States did not resume economic relations with the PRC, keeping in place some wartime sanctions, but it did lift the blockade. China, for its part, ended its purchase of U.S. debt, leading to substantial increases in U.S. borrowing costs and payments to service existing debt. The resulting resource crunch led to substantial increases in domestic taxes, returning individual and corporate tax rates roughly to where they were in the mid-1990s, and to additional limitations on spending for entitlement programs.¹⁰¹ The country faced relatively sluggish (1–2 percent on average) domestic growth over the medium term, which meant that the tax base was also slow to expand. The result was an increase in resources available for government and military spending, although much of this was needed for debt servicing and entitlements.

In addition to heavy initial spending to replace aircraft and munitions, the United States refocused its military around the challenge of defending its remaining allies in Asia (Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia) against the PRC's rising coercion to unify Asia. As a result, investments to defend European or Middle Eastern allies and partners were deprioritized. In particular, the United States decided to accept greater risk in the potential future demand for overall force size increases by paring back investments on readiness and modernization for most ground forces (excluding air and missile defense forces) and scaling back forward-postured ground forces in Europe and the Middle East.

Other States in Asia

Several key U.S. allies in the region—notably Japan, Australia, and the ROK—were sobered by both the U.S. defeat in the war and China's choice to detonate a nuclear weapon to end the conflict. Each decided to substantially increase its defense spending, no longer confident in the United States to provide for their defense against China and other threats. The most notable change came from Japan, where the war came to be seen as the end of the country's post-1945 approach to foreign and security policy. With the U.S. defeat, Japan was concerned that China would eventually turn its focus to asserting its claims over other contested territories, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

¹⁰¹ The domestic political decisions that the United States might make in these circumstances are highly uncertain and likely to be dependent on which parties are in control of government both during the war and during its aftermath. An alternative scenario in which the United States opts against funding a rebuilding of its military to preserve tax rates and entitlement spending is also plausible. In such a scenario, U.S. grand strategy would also differ from our assessment.

In the five years after the war, Japan more than doubled its prewar levels of defense spending (from roughly 1 percent of gross domestic product [GDP] to more than 2 percent) with further increases planned for the years following.¹⁰² Most of this increase was spent on greater air and naval capabilities, including an acceleration and increase (of an additional 100 aircraft beyond those already planned) of Japan's purchase of F-35s, accelerated development of Japan's advanced F-3 stealth fighter program, which entered service in 2029, and the purchase of two *Akagi*-class helicopter carrier destroyers capable of operating a larger complement of F-35Bs than the preceding *Izumo*-class built in the 2010s.¹⁰³ Japan also upended decades of policy and launched a nuclear weapons program by repurposing components of its civilian nuclear reactor and space launch industries, at first clandestinely and later more openly.¹⁰⁴ By 2030, it was established as a de facto nuclear weapons state with a small arsenal of air-deliverable nuclear weapons and a program well along in development to deploy submarine-launched cruise missiles with nuclear warheads on modified *Taigei*-class attack submarines.

ROK defense spending increases were more modest because the country perceived less of an immediate threat from China, having largely sat out the recent war. Furthermore, it had recently implemented large defense spending increases in the years prior to the war (2020–2026).¹⁰⁵ By 2030, defense spending increased to nearly 3.5 percent of GDP. The country's first light aircraft carrier came into service, and additional resources were spent on greater air and missile defense capabilities as the ROK prepared for defense against a future attack from China.¹⁰⁶ Concerned about the PRC's successful display of nuclear coercion during the war and about clandestine reports of Japan's nascent nuclear breakout, the ROK also began its own nuclear weapons program as a hedge against either the PRC or Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK);

¹⁰² Overall Japanese growth rates were limited after the war, however, both because of the difficulties of recovering from the destructive and disruptive effects of the conflict and because of the longer-term effects of Japan's rapidly aging workforce.

¹⁰³ For an official discussion of Japan's defense spending and planned equipment acquisition see Japan's most recent defense white paper, Japanese Ministry of Defense, *2020 Defense of Japan*, Tokyo, July 2020.

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion of Japan's nuclear breakout potential and the hurdles therein, see Mark Fitzpatrick, "How Japan Could Go Nuclear: It Has the Smarts and the Resources, but Does Tokyo Have the Will?" *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2019. For a theoretical explanation of why Japan might consider pursuing a nuclear capability after such a conflict, see Vipin Narang, "Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation: How States Pursue the Bomb," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2017.

¹⁰⁵ John Smith, "Buying a Big Stick: South Korea's Military Spending has North Korea Worried," Reuters, September 10, 2019; Jon Grevatt, "South Korea Cuts Defence Budget in Response to Pandemic," *Janes*, April 17, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ "S. Korea Develops Indigenous Port Surveillance System," *Yonhap News*, April 1, 2020; Jung H. Pak, *Trying to Loosen the Linchpin: China's Approach to South Korea*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, July 2020.

North Korea) using a similar strategy to try to limit U.S. help to the ROK in a crisis or conflict.¹⁰⁷

Australia had also increased its defense spending in the years before the war to counter a more assertive China—investing in long-range missiles, anti-ship missiles, and offensive cyberweapons. Although Australia felt less acutely threatened by potential Chinese aggression than by Japan after the war, Australia continued to increase its defense spending, approaching roughly 2.5 percent of its GDP by 2030. Much of the additional funds were spent on increased F-35 coproduction with the United States, increased advanced naval strike capabilities (including long-range anti-ship and land strike weapons), improved area denial capabilities (such as sea mines), and more attack submarines.¹⁰⁸

Other Southeast Asian states outside China’s orbit (Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia) also perceived increases in risks to their security following the 2027 Taiwan War. In particular, these countries feared that, with the United States defeated, China would seek to take control of contested maritime territories in the South China Sea. Although less impactful on a regional level (given their modest military capabilities), these states invested more resources in air and coast guard platforms, focusing on coastal defense and enhancing ISR capabilities.¹⁰⁹ The Philippines, bound by the mutual defense treaty with the United States, increased defense activities with the United States and U.S. regional allies. Thailand continued to bolster bilateral economic and military ties with China and reduce ties with the United States.

India likewise emerged from the 2027 war in a more advantageous position. Although generally supportive of the U.S. side in the war (including the blockade), Indian forces were not targeted or directly involved in the conflict. Moreover, as other states sought alternative supply chains, India was one of the prime beneficiaries of the blockade. Although some of those relationships reverted to China after the war, others did not, and India saw a sustained increase in its economic and manufacturing base because of foreign investments and trade. China, meanwhile, was forced to reduce its BRI projects throughout South Asia as it redirected capital for domestic purposes, easing Indian concerns about PRC encroachment in the region. The

¹⁰⁷ A discussion of Seoul’s likely motivation and ability to acquire a nuclear arsenal in a scenario that results in it feeling encircled by potentially hostile nuclear states is provided in Craig Ferguson, “How South Korea Could Acquire and Deploy Nuclear Weapons,” in Henry D. Sokolski, ed., *Alternative East Asian Nuclear Futures*, Vol. I, *Military Scenarios*, Arlington, Va.: Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Our prediction of Australia’s defense expenditure and modernization is based on the following sources: Australian Government, Department of Defence, *2020 Force Structure Plan*, Canberra, 2020b; Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Australia—AIM-120C-7 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles,” Australian Defence Plan news release, Washington, D.C., March 13, 2019; Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Australia—Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles,” news release, Washington, D.C., February 7, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ For an example of a Southeast Asian country’s maritime threat assessment and implications for maritime capabilities, including the need to bolster ISR, see Lyle J. Morris and Giacomo Paoli, *A Preliminary Assessment of Indonesia’s Maritime Security Threats and Capabilities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2469-RC, 2018.

rapprochement between the United States and Russia eased India's policy of pursuing favorable relations with both countries.

Nonetheless, India's own perception of threat from China increased after the war. After witnessing China's use of force to conquer claimed territory, India worried that China might take similar action in Arunachal Pradesh in the future. Bilateral tensions with China also worsened after anti-PRC protests spiked in Tibet after the war. India was acutely aware that it would lose if China brought to bear some of the same capabilities that it had used to defeat the United States. India therefore increased its defense spending substantially, up to roughly 3 percent of its rapidly expanding GDP by 2030. Given India's heightened threat perceptions, India also welcomed the renewed U.S. focus on containment of China.

Russia's power increased relative to both the United States and China as a result of the war. Russia also gained substantial goodwill (and windfall profits) from China as a result of the increases in energy shipments that it provided during the war. Russia maintained its military modernization spending, bolstered by its continued role as one of the world's largest arms exporters.¹¹⁰ However, it did not increase spending further, instead focusing on domestic priorities and the rebuilding of its depleted reserve funds.

China's Grand Strategy

Chinese strategy after the war revolved around two main goals: (1) continuing China's growth in power, influence, and economic capacity and (2) shaping an international community more in line with its growing power and status. In pursuit of these goals, however, China initially concluded that a tactical retreat was required. Facing substantial domestic unrest, economic problems, and international concern following the war, the CCP decided to focus largely inward in the 2028–2030 period. This relative restraint was surprising to some observers, who anticipated that Chinese leaders might try to manipulate tension with external adversaries to promote nationalism and domestic mobilization in the same way that Mao Tse-Tung did in the late 1950s.¹¹¹ Instead, as it has done in recent times, China adopted a more measured international approach when faced with domestic challenges.¹¹² Chinese investment and capital

¹¹⁰ Georg Mader and Stephen Elliott, "SIPRI: Biggest Arms Exporters and Importers," *European Security and Defense*, March 12, 2020.

¹¹¹ For example, Christensen argues that Mao initiated the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis to create a crisis atmosphere in which he could mobilize the Chinese people to sacrifice for the Great Leap Forward, his catastrophically failed attempt to rapidly transform China into a major industrial power. Mao seemed to welcome international conflicts, not because he wanted to go to war but because he wanted to exploit the tension over international issues for domestic political purposes. See Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997a.

¹¹² Fravel argues that the CCP's primary concern with regime security has served as an important source of caution in Chinese foreign policy in recent decades. He found that leaders were more likely to adopt cooperative foreign policies when preoccupied with domestic insecurity. M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Studies in International History and Politics, 2008.

were largely diverted from BRI projects (especially those outside China's immediate periphery), many of which were left uncompleted, and redirected for the reconstruction of Taiwan and other Chinese domestic priorities.

China's postwar foreign policy largely focused on efforts to rebuild fractured trade and investment relationships with countries that had been interrupted by the U.S. blockade. Key among these efforts were attempts to reestablish economic links between Taiwan and advanced economies as a means of gaining de facto acquiescence to PRC control of the island. In the developing world, China was eager to reestablish access to much-needed raw materials, although the drying up of BRI funding complicated relations with some countries that had previously been enthusiastic about reaping the economic benefits that a relationship with China represented.

China maintained its claims in its other existing maritime disputes against Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, although it chose to soften its pursuit of them in the initial years after the war. China limited provocative activities in the East China Sea and South China Sea for several years as it sought to project an image of a China that had achieved its major national goal with the integration of Taiwan and could now be considered a responsible leader in the international community. It also noted the increased military spending of U.S. allies in the region after the war and remained committed to ensuring its own defense and its ability to continue to pursue its outstanding territorial claims. The Japanese and South Korean nuclear programs led to substantially greater concern in Beijing as their scope and seriousness became clear, and they contributed after 2030 to a shift away from China's overall softer approach to the region following the unexpected success of U.S.-led multilateral security arrangements, as discussed in the next section.

Resentful of the success of the U.S. blockade, China also increased its efforts to build alternative political and economic institutions after the war. China built an international payments system as an alternative to SWIFT and forced all international firms doing business with China to use it. China also increased economic integration efforts with states in Southeast Asia and Central Asia with which China shared land borders, including a new multilateral economic community with China at the center that provided preferential economic access and the promise of enhanced infrastructure links. Outside its immediate region, Beijing continued seeking to gain, maintain, and strengthen control over key supply chains for resources and technologies needed for advanced weapons and dual-use systems. It continued to participate energetically in the UN system and seek leadership posts for its citizens, but it also argued that the headquarters should be removed from New York, where Chinese travel and access had been restricted during the war. Beijing offered to fund the construction of a new facility outside the United States, in Geneva, Vienna, Bangkok, or Shanghai.

United States' Grand Strategy

The United States faced several different geostrategic options following the conflict, none of which was appealing. The loss in the war with China had substantially degraded U.S. military

capabilities, weakened the U.S. economy, and weakened international perceptions of U.S. ability to maintain extended deterrence commitments around the world. At the same time, U.S. strategists argued that the conflict had been fought on terms highly favorable to China and that the United States itself was less damaged by the conflict than the PRC. Although the United States did not have a formal security commitment with Taiwan, its choice to defend it, policymakers argued, should enhance allied perceptions of U.S. willingness to honor its other security commitments.

After the war, the United States retained its strong desire to prevent a hegemonic China from dominating East Asia and the global economy. To pursue this goal, the United States decided that it needed to change its strategy. First, it had become clear that preventing PRC hegemony in East Asia would need to consume a greater share of U.S. attention and efforts. The United States became increasingly willing to let other strategic problems, such as stability in the Middle East or deterrence of Russia in Europe, be handled by others. This meant that the United States reversed past policy and no longer opposed European defense integration that did not involve NATO.

Second, the United States moved to strengthen its commitments within Asia to many existing partners, specifically Japan, the Philippines, Australia, Singapore, and South Korea, although on new terms in some cases. Although some states refrained from direct participation in the war, the United States forgave those decisions in the name of a stronger deterrent against future Chinese aggression.¹¹³ U.S. evaluation of geographic realities and the need to maintain accesses and basing around China's maritime periphery made each of these nations key to Washington's postwar strategy. The United States supported increased defense spending among allies, increased weapons technology transfer, and the independent nuclear programs of Japan and South Korea. The United States also worked actively to increase multilateral security cooperation among the states seeking to balance against China, arguing that the limited participation in the Taiwan War showed the dangers of the lack of collective and institutionalized security arrangements in the region. Several states—including Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea—showed an increased willingness to consider multilateral cooperation in this area, which eventually led to the establishment of a collective security arrangement after 2029. U.S. security relations also became closer with India, albeit to a more limited degree.

Third, the United States sought to isolate China from the advanced economies of the world, refusing to lift domestic sanctions against China for years after the war and encouraging its partners and allies to find alternative economic arrangements as well. Although the United States lifted the blockade on China after the cease-fire, it retained a strong interest in its ability to impose the blockade again in the future and continued to maintain forces in Southeast Asia in part to retain this capability. The United States also worked aggressively to cease the sharing or codevelopment of advanced technology with China, forcing U.S. technology firms to end

¹¹³ This is similar to how the United States forgave Thailand's collaboration with Japan after World War II.

partnerships in China and redirect investments to other U.S. partners or to domestic uses, while pressuring allied governments to take similar steps. Chinese students, tourists, and other visitors to the United States were also sharply curtailed.

Finally, the United States revisited its nuclear weapons doctrine and posture. China's nuclear demonstration was a sobering reminder that the country had risked nuclear war in its defense of Taiwan. In the aftermath of the war, the public generally supported the administration's nuclear restraint after what had become a losing war. For U.S. foreign policymakers, however, the picture was mixed. On one hand, there was a collective sense of relief that an all-out nuclear war had been avoided, but on the other hand, ending the conflict in the face of nuclear coercion had weakened the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats. Some hawkish politicians in Congress called for the United States to develop the capability to launch a disarming first strike on China, arguing that doing so would prevent successful coercion in the future.

The administration assessed, however, that the country could ill afford such an ambitious undertaking at a time when it needed to rebuild its military; and that doing so would likely end with China massively expanding its nuclear arsenal. Instead, the administration took another approach: a postwar nuclear posture statement seeking to differentiate its nuclear decisionmaking during the Taiwan War from future conflicts. The declaration stated that U.S. willingness to use nuclear weapons was not fixed and would vary depending on context. Taiwan, the report maintained, had not been a vital U.S. interest. However, in the event that the defense of the homeland or a treaty ally demanded it, United States would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons. Although the United States would defend its allies, the statement acknowledged that the most-credible threats came from those with everything to lose. It was for this reason that the United States needed to support its allies in acquiring their own nuclear weapons.¹¹⁴ In addition to this doctrinal change, the United States also began investing more in NSNW programs to give it additional options in future conflicts.¹¹⁵

Geopolitical Relationships

U.S.-China relations were at a low point immediately following the conflict. The bilateral relationship appeared to have entered a long-term period of tension and hostility, with the ever-present threat of a renewed conflict over maritime disputes and continued U.S. efforts to isolate China economically. The CCP portrayed all such efforts by the United States as a desperate attempt to contain China because the U.S. "hegemony" was crumbling after China's military victory. Sino-U.S. bilateral relations remained in a deep freeze for years as both sides increasingly tried to mobilize potential allies and partners in competing coalitions aimed at one another.

¹¹⁴ For theoretical arguments along these lines, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966.

¹¹⁵ For a discussion of the evolution of U.S. NSNW programs, see Woolf, 2020a.

The war with China convinced Japan and Australia that a stronger, U.S.-led security infrastructure was needed in the region. Chinese attacks on Japanese forces and the Japanese homeland increased nationalism and sharply underscored China's relative military advantages. Japan considered Chinese occupation of Taiwan a grave threat to its security interests because of its proximity to Japan's Southwest Islands and the improved power projection posture that it granted to Chinese forces in and beyond the first and second island chains. Tokyo faced a vocal pacifist movement—especially on Okinawa, where prefectural leaders and local pacifists pressured for withdrawal of U.S. forces from the island, but Japanese citizens generally supported strengthened ties with the United States. Likewise, Chinese military and cyberattacks on Australian bases and critical infrastructure increased Australian concerns regarding Beijing's ambitions, giving greater justification for Canberra to strengthen its prewar national defense and security relationships. At the same time, Japan and Australia concluded that even as they strengthened their alliances and enhanced their military capabilities, they should work to avoid a zero-sum Cold War-style relationship with China. Therefore, they resisted U.S. efforts to limit all economic interactions with the PRC.

The Philippines

In the postwar environment, China's victory heightened the Philippines' concerns about Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.¹¹⁶ Faced with clear evidence of China's power on its periphery, the Philippines increased its own military spending and explored closer security cooperation with other regional states, such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. Manila faced heavy Chinese pressure to withdraw from its mutual defense treaty with the United States but refused to do so after the war. Instead, the Philippines pursued closer security links with the United States and supported U.S. efforts to make alliances in the region more multilateral. The Philippines gave U.S. forces increased access to air and naval bases, where they conducted regular joint exercises and prepositioned equipment on Philippine territory. These measures were pursued in increments, however: Manila's leadership remained wary of inviting opposition from Philippine nationalists and stoking the local population's concerns about a return of foreign troops' permanent presence.¹¹⁷ The Philippines also took steps to upgrade its indigenous defense capabilities, including an increase in defense spending to replenish outdated naval, air force, and army equipment; addressing corruption in the armed forces; and increasing maritime domain awareness through more-robust surveillance and training. However, the results of this modernization remained limited in comparison with other, more-powerful states in the region.

¹¹⁶ Florante S. Solmerin, "AFP World's 6th Worst Army," *Manila Standard*, October 22, 2015.

¹¹⁷ For an assessment of Philippine nationalists' opposition to the presence of foreign troops in Manila, see Eleanor Albert, *The U.S.-Philippines Defense Alliance*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 2016.

South Korea

As the war unfolded and China successfully absorbed Taiwan, the realities of China's power projection, the violent end of Taiwan's democracy and independence, and the perceived reduction in relative U.S. capabilities caused South Korea to reassess its short- and long-term priorities. The U.S. security guarantee was in greater doubt because of South Korea's unwillingness to support the United States during the Taiwan War. The United States indicated that it was willing to mend fences but that it expected the alliance to be renegotiated on different terms. Rather than an alliance built around defending South Korea against the threat from the DPRK, the United States wanted a new relationship in which a primary aim would be balancing against a rising China. South Korea was willing to accept such an arrangement in light of China's victory in the recent war but also saw that this relationship might not be ironclad.

Faced with the potential loss of the U.S. security guarantee, the ROK decided to (1) strengthen its postwar relations with Japan, (2) increase investment in indigenous defense capabilities, (3) diversify its defense cooperation arrangements, and (4) develop its own nuclear weapons. South Korea's decision to pursue a nuclear program resulted from its concerns about defense, both against the PRC and the DPRK if U.S. security commitments should end.¹¹⁸

The ROK also pursued a reexamination of inter-Korean relations and made efforts to reduce tensions with the DPRK. Relations with the PRC, meanwhile, remained more cordial than Sino-Japanese relations because the ROK had not participated in the conflict and took clear steps to limit U.S. military activities on its territory during the war. Economic ties with China were substantially disrupted by the war when the ROK decided it would not fight the U.S. blockade, but they resumed thereafter and South Korea's economic links with the PRC remained the most substantial of any U.S. Asian ally in the years following the conflict. Nonetheless, the ROK's decision to draw closer to the United States and other U.S. allies in the region led both sides to treat one another with a greater sense of wariness.

Multilateral Security Arrangements in Asia

In 2029, the United States, Japan, and Australia entered into the first multilateral security pact in Asia, formalized in the Honolulu Treaty. The arrangement, which came to be known as PATO, formally committed each state to defend the others in the event of any attacks on its territory and laid the groundwork for more-integrated defense planning. Concerned with being left out of the arrangement (particularly given the membership of Japan), South Korea also joined the arrangement in 2030. Later the same year, there was substantial debate among the

¹¹⁸ For a discussion of South Korea's defense reform efforts and threat perceptions that might lead Seoul to take these actions in this scenario, see In-Bum Chun, *Korean Defense Reform: History and Challenges*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, October 31, 2017; Chang-Kwoun Park, *The Moon Jae-in Administration's Defense Reform 2.0: Direction and Considerations*, Seoul, South Korea: Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 2018; and Bruce Bennett and Chaibong Ham, "The Political Economy of US-ROK OPCON Transfer," AIPS Roundtable, Asan Institute of Policy Studies, Seoul, Korea, April 15, 2010.

existing members about the application of the Philippines to join PATO, with the United States strongly in favor because of Washington's assessment of the geographic importance of the Philippines to PATO's military posture. In the end, following a change in government in the Philippines and notable recent increases in Philippine defense spending, the Philippines was invited to join in 2030. Although potential membership in PATO was discussed in other capitals, from Hanoi to Wellington to Delhi to Singapore, further expansion in membership did not appear to be imminent.

Although not entirely unexpected, China's reaction to the creation of the organization was negative. In some ways, the organization's initial membership merely formalized the coalition of states that China had just fought against over Taiwan. However, the expansion of membership (including South Korea and the Philippines) led to sharp declines in the PRC's diplomatic relations with member countries and, by 2030, forced a reconsideration in Beijing regarding whether its postwar soft-power approach to regional diplomacy was working or a more assertive stance was needed to prevent U.S.-led containment.

Other Asian States

After the war, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam were affected differently by the rapidly deteriorating U.S.-China relationship. Those who became warier of increased Chinese dominance (specifically Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam) chose to bolster their defense capabilities.¹¹⁹ Conversely, Thailand's choice to formally abandon its alliance with the United States and move closer to the PRC reflected its calculation that, cut off from U.S. military and diplomatic support because of its authoritarian government, alternative Chinese sources of support—including Chinese investments, tourism, and arms sales—were likely to be more reliable going forward.

One further result of these divergent approaches by states in Southeast Asia was the clear reduction in importance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN meetings were attended by increasingly lower-level officials, and all members ceased to view the body as an important vehicle for regional cooperation and interests, which were now seen to be too often contradictory. Although ASEAN continued to exist through 2030, some states were beginning to openly consider withdrawing or pursuing the development of alternative regional bodies among strategically like-minded states. Friction increased between Chinese client states—such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar—and larger members with more-diverse economies, such as Indonesia and Vietnam.

¹¹⁹ Johannes Herlijanto, *Public Perceptions of China in Indonesia: The Indonesian National Survey*, Singapore: ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, ISEAS Perspective, Vol. 2017, No. 89, December 2017; “First Line of Defense: Indonesia to Populate Natuna Waters with Fishers,” *Jakarta Post*, January 6, 2020; Koh Swee Lean Collin, “Commentary: Indonesia's High-Stakes Stand-Off with China in the South China Sea,” *Channel News Asia*, January 9, 2020; Ralph Jennings, “Vietnam Explores Increasing Foreign Military Cooperation to Resist China,” *Voice of America*, January 25, 2020.

India

The war prompted more of an evolution than a revolution in Indian geopolitics. The capabilities that the PRC demonstrated in its defeat of the United States increased Indian perceptions of the potential threat that China could pose to India and encouraged India to pursue greater security cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia—but it chose not to join PATO. Relations with China generally worsened after the war, partly because of tensions over India's efforts to retain the business of many firms that had temporarily relocated production during the conflict and partly because of India's continued support for the Tibetan government in exile.¹²⁰

NATO Allies

U.S. NATO allies became increasingly concerned about the willingness and ability of the United States to defend its allies in Europe following its defeat in the Pacific. Many key states, particularly in Eastern Europe, invested more in their own defense as a result. Following the war, U.S. presence in Europe remained limited because of Washington's decision to focus more heavily on Asia, although some forces did remain.

France, Germany, and Italy committed to the French-led Initiative Européenne de Défense, an effort to develop European strategic autonomy for military operations.¹²¹ This effort included a strict “Europe first” approach to military industrial capacity and acquisitions.¹²² The UK, although no longer a member of the EU, also joined the initiative, dividing its military investments between Europe and the United States.

Sino-European relations were damaged by the war. Scenes of China's aggression against Taiwan and the toll that the conflict imposed on the island soured public perceptions of the CCP. Trade between Europe and China resumed after the war but at lower levels. Investment flows in both directions were most heavily affected as Chinese investments in European BRI projects largely dried up and companies became increasingly hesitant to invest in new projects in China. Many European states increasingly worried about Chinese influence and political interference and about possible Chinese military ambitions in the Arctic. Even so, most states in Europe remained uninterested in contributing militarily to U.S. efforts to contain China in the Indo-

¹²⁰ The reduction in PRC BRI activity in South Asia, including large decreases in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, removed one source of tension with Beijing, but this was offset by other factors.

¹²¹ We assume the outcome of the war as heightening France's ongoing interest in greater defense autonomy. For one thing, a section of France's 2017 *Strategic Review* is entitled “Our Defence Strategy: Strategic Autonomy and European Ambition.” For another, French President Emmanuel Macron (who in a September 2017 Sorbonne speech addressed “Europe's autonomous operating capabilities”) has pursued the idea through the European Intervention Initiative. See Ulrike Franke and Tara Varma, *Independence Play: Europe's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy*, London, UK: European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2019. Germany also supports strategic autonomy: 2019 polling indicated that a majority of Germans were in favor of reducing reliance on the United States and increasing ties with Russia. Davis VanOderp, “Germans in Favor of ‘Reducing Reliance’ on US,” *Die Welt*, March 12, 2019.

¹²² Sebastien Sprenger, “Tank-Killing Missile Tests ‘Europe First’ Weapons Policy,” *Defense News*, September 19, 2020b.

Pacific (France and the UK were partial exceptions), preferring to focus their defense and security efforts closer to home.

Russia

Russia found its geopolitical situation substantially improved by the war. It had seen few benefits to joining the conflict, which appeared likely to weaken both China and the United States.¹²³ Russia did, however, increase intelligence-sharing with China and spread disinformation intended to weaken support for the United States' alliances and security partnerships.¹²⁴ Russia also began construction of an emergency oil pipeline shortly after the announcement of a cease-fire in exchange for Chinese pledges of increased postwar financing of Russian projects in the Arctic.¹²⁵

After the war, the two states developed increasingly close economic ties in the energy and defense sector as China sought to rapidly rebuild its military and limit its reliance on seaborne trade. Russia also continued to sell military arms and defense technology to China, particularly missile defense systems; Sino-Russian cooperation had been growing in these areas prior to the conflict.¹²⁶ These exchanges helped Moscow recover from the lingering effects of its post-COVID-19 recession.

Russia retained longer-term concerns regarding the growth of Chinese power and influence in Northeast and Central Asia and remained wary of a potential future change in U.S. or European policy toward the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions. But in 2030, those concerns appeared manageable.

Risk of Conflict Recurrence

The risk of conflict recurrence in the near-term between China and the United States appeared to be limited, given U.S. reluctance to undertake a repeat campaign to liberate Taiwan, and the PRC's initial decision to take a more restrained approach to its remaining territorial

¹²³ A major driver of Russian cooperation with China is a coincident interest in counterbalancing and eroding U.S. power, but this cooperation nonetheless remains sensitive to growing Sino-Russian power asymmetries (Richard J. Ellings and Robert Sutter, eds. *Axis of Authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia Cooperation*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2018).

¹²⁴ In the past, China has been largely content to benefit from brazen Russian influence operations intended to weaken and divide the United States and its alliance networks. Beginning in 2020, however, it increasingly appeared as though China were beginning to employ similar measures itself. In this scenario, such convergence continues and, as a result of the conflict, deepens into more-explicit cooperation (Jessica Brandt and Torrey Taussig, *The Kremlin's Disinformation Playbook Goes to Beijing*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, May 19, 2020; Kristine Lee and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, *Forecasting Synergies in Chinese and Russia Digital Influence Operations*, Seoul, Korea: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, July 2, 2020).

¹²⁵ Nazrin Mehdiyeva, *Russia's Arctic Papers: The Evolution of Strategic Thinking on the High North*, Rome, Italy: NATO Defense College, 2018.

¹²⁶ For a discussion of Russia's arms sales to China today, see Richard Weitz, *The Expanding China-Russia Defense Partnership*, Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2019, pp. 10–12.

disputes. With their militaries and economies battered and exhausted by the conflict, neither side was enthusiastic about the prospect of a resumption of hostilities.

In the long term, however, the potential for Sino-American conflict remained. Although the United States and its allies tacitly accepted the implausibility of liberating Taiwan, there remained several other sources of tension with China. Disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea persisted, and while China limited its provocative actions in the region for several years after the war, it did not scale back its claims or ambitions in either area. The United States sought to restrain Japan from taking provocative actions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands but was concerned about its ability to do so, given its agreement to guarantee Japanese security and the new Japanese nuclear capability.

More broadly, the U.S. effort to construct PATO heightened Chinese security concerns in the region. China watched rising defense budgets (and nuclear weapons development) in Japan with great concern, concluding that the United States and Japan intended to implement a hard containment policy that left little room for China's peaceful rise. China therefore felt strongly motivated to increase its own defense capabilities to ensure that a U.S. or NATO-led coalition could not threaten its future security. Although the Chinese victory over Taiwan removed one key source of potential conflict between the two sides, it exacerbated another: the mutual security concerns posed by the growth in military power of an apparently hostile adversary.

International Order

The Taiwan War had substantial, damaging effects on the existing international order, creating blocs in Asia in much the same way that U.S.-China competition during the Cold War had in Europe. Norms against nuclear proliferation eroded. The apparent success of PRC nuclear coercion in motivating the United States to agree to a cease-fire illustrated both the potential utility of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict and the apparent weakness of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence guarantees. This being the case, the incentives for U.S. allies to possess their own nuclear weapons appeared much greater. U.S. acquiescence to these decisions led other U.S. partners around the world, such as Saudi Arabia and Poland, to begin considering whether they, too, should develop their own nuclear capabilities. Although not eliminated, the nonproliferation norm appeared to have weakened substantially.

International institutions also came under strain following the conflict. Sino-American tensions bled over into increased jockeying for influence and positions in the UN, a forum for competition to which the United States had previously paid little attention since the end of the Cold War. The UN Security Council became gridlocked on questions regarding the use of force or on issues of importance to either U.S. or Chinese allies or partners. Beijing proposed moving the UN Headquarters out of New York, but the United States was able to block the change. Other international economic institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), still existed, but the effectiveness of the U.S. blockade during the conflict and sustained U.S. sanctions on China after the war highlighted their limitations in keeping the global economy open.

New institutions were also created or strengthened in the aftermath of the war. The United States created PATO, although China created a series of alternative international economic institutions in an effort to insulate itself from the effects of any future U.S. blockade. These institutions supported a new China-based international payments system (required for doing business with Chinese firms) and a new trade and investment community that encompassed several of China's overland neighbors in Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

Risk of Conflict with Other Great Powers

The risks of conflict between other great powers lessened somewhat in the aftermath of the Taiwan War. In the medium term, the risk of conflict between China and India did increase somewhat after the war. India's assessment of the heightened threat posed by China was demonstrated in its decisions to increase its own defense spending while drawing closer to the United States and PATO. This heightened Beijing's own perception of the need to pay attention to its southwestern flank. Partly under the guise of tamping down postwar Tibetan protests, China increased its military capabilities and posture on the border with India, steps that were noted and responded to in kind by New Delhi. Although both sides remained cautious about taking steps that could precipitate a conflict (which India assessed it would likely lose and China assessed as risking expansion into a larger war involving the United States), tensions remained high well into the 2030s.

Implications for the Joint Force in This Postwar Setting

The United States refocused its military around the challenge of defending its PATO alliance structure and preventing China from using coercion to force other states into Beijing's orbit. This meant replacing losses of fifth-generation aircraft and undersea forces; replenishing and greatly expanding inventories of advanced precision-guided munitions, especially standoff weapons; and accelerating investments in developing next-generation aircraft and unmanned aircraft systems that could deliver rapid, cost-effective surveillance and attack capabilities. The joint force greatly increased investments in active and passive defenses and resiliency enhancements to protect air bases from cruise and ballistic missiles, including research into directed energy programs and large increases in such systems as Indirect Fire Protection Capability Increment 2, with air and missile defense for the joint force regaining emphasis in the prioritization of Army missions. However, the Air Force also greatly increased its interest in developing concept of operations and acquiring capabilities to enable the projection of airpower with less reliance on fixed operating locations.

The Taiwan war also illustrated the value of regional allies having effective self-defense capabilities, so security force assistance became an area of intensified focus and resourcing for all the services in the INDOPACOM AOR, especially for U.S. Army Pacific. The Space Force developed a more resilient, distributed satellite system for military purposes, with large numbers

of smaller satellites performing redundant tasks to limit the vulnerability of U.S. systems to Chinese ASAT weapons.¹²⁷ Congress increased funding for precision munition stockpiles and underwrote investments to streamline their production and allow for greater surge capacity.

In the wake of Chinese nuclear threats and the nuclear demonstration that brought the conflict to an end, the U.S. Department of Defense and all of the services gave heightened consideration to issues of nuclear strategy and the myriad operational challenges associated with potentially having to operate in an environment where nuclear weapons are being used operationally. Additional funding was provided for an exploration of concepts of operations regarding U.S. NSNWs, to provide U.S. decisionmakers with a flexible set of response options in the nuclear domain. Funding for ballistic missile defense systems was also increased, and the intent was expressed to provide fuller coverage of both the United States and other NATO members. These investments led some analysts in China to grow concerned regarding whether the United States was preparing to fight a future conflict with nuclear weapons or to limit the effectiveness of China's nuclear deterrent. As a result of these concerns and other concerns about the emerging Japanese nuclear program, China shifted resources into greater nuclear weapons production, shifted strategic forces to a "launch on warning" posture, and reconsidered its formal no-first-use doctrine. Finally, the United States pared back investments in readiness and modernization for most ground forces (excluding air and missile defense forces), scaled back forward-postured ground forces in Europe and the Middle East, and shifted air and maritime assets from those regions to the Indo-Pacific.

¹²⁷ For a discussion on how the USAF might conduct distributed satellite constellations, see Robert Preston, *Distributed Satellite Constellations Offer Advantages Over Monolithic Systems*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RB-92-AF, 2004.

3. United States Degrades China's Military Power After an East China Sea Conflict Expands

NOTE: This report was finalized in January 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has not been subsequently updated.

By early 2027, Beijing assessed that the United States was unlikely to support Japan in a future clash over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands because of ongoing U.S. domestic challenges and instability, and that, without U.S. support Japan would surrender the islands short of war. Beijing therefore initiated a gray-zone operation to wrest administrative control of them from Tokyo, which spiraled into a Sino-Japanese war. To China's surprise, the United States intervened—both to defend Japanese territory and to diminish China's future ability to militarily coerce its neighbors. Over six months of fighting, the allies inflicted severe damage on the PLA. Russia feared that China's defeat would threaten its own interests and therefore entered the war in its later stages, encouraged by promises of postwar Chinese economic largesse. Following two additional weeks of intense conventional warfare between the Russia-PRC entente and the U.S.-Japan alliance, the belligerents agreed to negotiate a termination of combat operations to avoid the risk of nuclear escalation.

After the war, each side took steps to limit the risk of conflict recurrence. China, recognizing the PLA's weakness, temporarily adopted a more restrained foreign policy. China also undertook a massive five-year plan for military reconstruction and adopted a less restrained nuclear posture. Despite its loss, however, the CCP maintained a firm grip on power. Sino-Russian cooperation deepened into a mutual defense pact and Russia sought to cast itself as the war's peacemaker to enhance its global stature. The United States, for its part, invested in maintaining its new military edge over China in the Indo-Pacific but also grappled with the heightened risk of simultaneous wars in Asia and Europe, given the postwar alignment of China and Russia. Australia and Japan aligned even more closely with the United States while other states—such as South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia—invested more in their militaries but were reluctant to put their economic ties with Beijing at risk over a security threat that they now viewed to be at least temporarily diminished.

We explore some new features of a possible future great power war in this scenario. We start with a situation in which, unlike in the last scenario, the adversary does not intentionally initiate the conflict but rather stumbles into it because of poor prewar assumptions. We also explore the possibility of expanding U.S. war aims and show how this could create conditions that could cause Russia to join a U.S-China conflict. In the scenario outlined in Chapter 2, the United States targeted Chinese platforms in an attempt to prevent China from invading Taiwan; in this scenario, we explore the possibility that the United States might intentionally target China's

extant military capabilities to limit China's ability to coerce its neighbors and wage war in the future.

Conflict Narrative

We begin by describing the conflict scenario chronologically. Later in the chapter, we go into greater detail on key aspects of the conflict phase, such as changes in political alignments.

Chinese Coast Guard's Attempts to Gain Administrative Control of Islands

In the years before the war, the U.S.-China competition intensified. China's more militarized approach toward its neighbors in this period had led to a growing sense in Washington that intense competition between the two sides was inevitable and that Washington might have to take military action at some point to persuade Beijing to stop using military coercion against a U.S. ally or friend. The United States had taken steps to unlink its economy from China's and was drafting new strategy documents that would lead to an even more significant shift of U.S. national security resources toward the Indo-Pacific. In the same period, China assessed (incorrectly, as it would soon learn) that the United States had become a paper tiger, a country that employed bellicose rhetoric but was ultimately unwilling to pay the high price of war in the Pacific. China thought that the domestic political turmoil, economic losses, and defense budget cuts that followed the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that the United States was going to turn inward and was less committed to its allies than in the past.¹²⁸

China anticipated that, in the absence of full U.S. support, Japan would back down if China were to challenge Japan's control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Beijing assessed that economic considerations and lack of popular appetite for conflict among Japan's populace would force Tokyo to cede administrative control of the islands to China rather than risk escalation to war.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ For the purposes of this scenario, we explore the possibility that China underestimates U.S. commitments to its allies. Little is known about how Chinese leaders assess the credibility of U.S. security commitments, so it is unclear if, in reality, China would interpret the consequences of economic trends in this way. For arguments suggesting that China might interpret trends this way, see Joel Wuthnow, "US 'Minilateralism' in Asia and China's Responses: A New Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 115, 2019; Sun Xiaokun, "A Chinese Perspective on US Alliances," *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2019; Camille Boullenois, Jiakun Jack Zhang, Melanie Hart, Blaine Johnson, and Earl Wang, *The Trump Opportunity: Chinese Perceptions of the US Administration*, London, UK: European Council on Foreign Affairs, June 20, 2018; and Adam P. Liff, "China and the US Alliance System," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 233, 2018. More generally, Chinese leaders could assess that the United States is unwilling to risk a great power war (especially one that might culminate in a strategic nuclear exchange) over a small number of uninhabited Pacific islands—especially if the United States has not adopted a formal position on the sovereignty of those islands. For an outline of this logic, see Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War over Small Stakes*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2019.

¹²⁹ For a discussion of how states seek to drive wedges between allies, see Andrew D. Taffer, "Threat and Opportunity: Chinese Wedging in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Dispute," *Asian Security*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2019; and Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2011.

Thus, Chinese leaders calculated that they could likely achieve their objectives regarding the disputed territory without triggering a wider conflict.

China's military strategy centered on using militia and Coast Guard forces to overwhelm the Japan Coast Guard (JCG), forcing Japan to decide whether it was willing to respond with conventional forces—i.e., the JMSDF—knowing that doing so could lead to a clash with the PLAN and war with China.¹³⁰ China's military objective was to quickly gain control over the islands by establishing a *cordon sanitaire*—a line that Japan, the United States, or other parties would not be able to cross, and an extended defensive perimeter defined by the existing East China Sea air defense identification zone wherein the PLA could enforce air and maritime exclusion zones. This line around the islands would need to be set up before the United States could intervene;¹³¹ China calculated that once it gained control over the islands, the United States would back down because it would not want to risk a wider conflict.¹³²

China initiated the conflict by sending several hundred fishing boats and maritime militia vessels, backed up by China Coast Guard (CCG) ships, to the area around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.¹³³ Japan responded immediately by sending its own coast guard ships to the area to disperse the Chinese vessels and deter them from landing on the islands. Tokyo also requested U.S. assistance in providing additional intelligence and surveillance support. In the first clash between Chinese and Japanese vessels, a Chinese Maritime Militia ship rammed one of the JCG patrol vessels. The JCG attempted to detain the crew of the Chinese vessel.¹³⁴ The CCG

¹³⁰ This use of paramilitary force is consistent with open-source U.S. intelligence assessments of China's extant approach to advancing its maritime sovereignty claims in situations that carry a relatively high risk of escalation; see Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019b. Moreover, China's previous willingness to use maritime militia, the CCG, and PLAN forces in concert to "flood the zone" around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and deter a Japanese response—as it did in its August 5, 2016, operation, during which hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels supported by CCG and PLAN assets spent about four days in the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—supports the plausibility of the opening stages of this scenario. For example, see Adam P. Liff, "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response," in Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2019.

¹³¹ China has attempted to establish *cordons sanitaire* around other disputed maritime areas in the past, notably in the 2013 Haiyang Shiyou 981 deep-sea drilling platform (Patrick M. Cronin, "US Should Help Vietnam Counter China's Coercion," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, East-West Center, No. 269, June 26, 2014).

¹³² Some Chinese experts interviewed by U.S. scholars have expressed a belief that the United States is unwilling to risks a great power war that could end in nuclear escalation over these islands; see Cunningham and Fravel, 2019. Some PLA writing also suggests that Chinese leadership believes that most of its future wars are likely to remain limited and controllable (Kaufman and Hartnett, 2016).

¹³³ The "little blue men" of the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia have conducted swarming operations in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands before, since as early as 1978, and such operations have increased in tempo and scale since 2016 (Andrew S. Erickson, "Exposed: Pentagon Report Highlights China's Maritime Militia," *National Interest*, August 20, 2018a; Andrew S. Erickson, "Shining a Spotlight: Revealing China's Maritime Militia to Deter Its Use," *National Interest*, November 25, 2018b).

¹³⁴ In this sense, the scenario recalls previous incidents of maritime brinksmanship, such as in 2010, when three JCG ships responded to hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels in and near the waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In that incident, a Chinese fishing vessel rammed two of the Japanese ships, but the crisis did not escalate much

responded, leading to a confrontation between Japanese and Chinese ships, which maneuvered in close proximity and used water cannons against each other. In contrast to previous incidents in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, this engagement resulted in a collision involving a JCG ship and a CCG one. China responded by dispatching larger Coast Guard cutters that were more heavily armed to intervene, challenging the JCG's ability to handle the escalating situation and raising the possibility that the JMSDF might have to intervene.¹³⁵ This was backed up by the dispatch of a PLAN surface action group to the area and by PLA Naval Air Force and PLAAF air patrols, which Beijing hoped would deter Japan from using its self-defense forces against the Chinese fishing vessels, maritime militia, and Coast Guard ships.¹³⁶ At this point, China declared an air and maritime exclusion zone around the disputed features and sought to gain de facto control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by enforcing that zone until PRC administrative control was acknowledged by Tokyo.¹³⁷

However, China had badly miscalculated how the United States and Japan would view and respond to the aggression. Tokyo believed that failure to respond muscularly would embolden future Chinese aggression.¹³⁸ The stakes for the United States were also much higher than the value of the islands themselves. Although the United States had not taken a formal position on the sovereignty dispute prior to the war, it recognized Japan's administrative control over the islands and said that the region, which Japan considers part of its sovereign territory, were covered by the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty.¹³⁹ The United States and Japan, therefore, both saw China's attempt to exert control over the islands as a test of the credibility of the U.S.-Japan alliance—and U.S. leaders perceived it as a test of the credibility of U.S. commitment to allies and partners in the region more generally.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, the United States entered the conflict to

further (Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas, *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 2017).

¹³⁵ Gabriel Dominguez, "Update: China Coast Guard Despatching Zhaotou-Class Cutters to Waters Around Disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands," *Janes*, January 31, 2020; "Beijing Seeks Tokyo's Cooperation over Chinese Fishing Boat and Japanese Destroyer Collision," *Japan Times*, April 1, 2020.

¹³⁶ For a discussion of the role of the PLAN in a future Chinese counter-intervention campaign waged over disputed territory in the Western Pacific, see Ryan D. Martinson, "Counter-Intervention in Chinese Naval Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, March 27, 2020.

¹³⁷ This is a long-standing goal of Chinese policy (Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views Regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute," *China Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 41, June 4, 2013).

¹³⁸ The symbolic dimensions of the dispute—what the crisis means for such intangible factors as reputation and resolve—therefore take on a core importance in the belligerents' decisionmaking, an argument made by Todd Hall, "More Significance Than Value: Explaining Developments in the Sino-Japanese Contest over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (August 2019)," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2019.

¹³⁹ Ankit Panda, "Obama: Senkakus Covered Under US-Japan Security Treaty," *The Diplomat*, April 24, 2014; Ankit Panda, "Mattis: Senkakus Covered Under US-Japan Security Treaty," *The Diplomat*, February 6, 2017.

¹⁴⁰ This interpretation of the stakes of the crisis is consistent with previous maritime crises in East Asia, even if the fundamental theory of "alliance interdependence" is disputable. Iain D. Henry, "What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2020.

uphold its commitments to Japan and to deter future Chinese use of military coercion to resolve regional disputes. Within two weeks of the first clash between JCG and CCG vessels, and a week after the PRC declaration of an exclusion zone, the United States and Japan activated Article V of the Mutual Security Treaty and notified the UN Security Council of China's aggression and the allied response.

Japanese and U.S. Response with Conventional Forces

In response to China's announcement of an exclusion zone around the islands and deployment of naval and air forces to enforce it, Japan deployed its Air Self-Defense Force and JMSDF assets to the area to prevent China from landing troops on the disputed islands. Once Japan made these moves, clashes between conventional forces ensued. The U.S. air and naval forces based in Japan joined the conflict and the United States prepared to deploy additional forces to the region.

The United States expected to face serious operational challenges in a conflict so close to China and knew that it would be difficult to decisively defeat China if the conflict stayed limited to the disputed area around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.¹⁴¹ U.S. leaders, therefore, made plans to expand the scope of conflict, as detailed later in this chapter, to compel China to abandon its attempt to establish control of the area. Additionally, China's aggression appeared to confirm the United States' worst fears about China's ambitions as a rising power. As a result, the United States decided that a primary objective in the conflict would be to substantially degrade Chinese military power, particularly Chinese air and naval capabilities. Japanese leaders feared that broader U.S. war objectives created escalatory risks that could imperil Japan's civilian populace, civil infrastructure, and economic interests, but it acquiesced to U.S. plans because of Washington's guarantees for thorough consultation and allied decisionmaking on major operations.

The U.S.-Japan military strategy had three components. First, the United States and Japan would make it more difficult for China to control the disputed islands by destroying or disabling PLA naval and air forces involved in China's operations. Second, the United States would target core aspects of Chinese air and naval power to hamper reinforcement of the East China Sea campaign and to impose costs that would compel China to abandon its occupation of the islands and degrade its military power for other contingencies as well. Finally, the United States would engage in diplomatic efforts to stop the flow of war materiel and strategic resources into China.¹⁴² Washington hoped that by both diminishing China's military capacity and raising the

¹⁴¹ On the operational difficulties that the United States would face fighting China in the East China Sea, see Heginbotham et al., 2015.

¹⁴² The United States opted against instituting a distant blockade, assessing that China's actions in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were less likely to generate widespread international outrage and support for such measures. Without that support, the naval requirements for a blockade would be higher, and these forces were needed to directly confront the PLA.

costs of aggression, it would compel China to abandon this operation and deter China from using military force in the future to coerce Japan, Taiwan, India, or rival South China Sea maritime dispute claimants.

After approximately two weeks of allied operations against the PLA air forces, surface action groups, and submarines that were enforcing the *cordon*, China realized that it has miscalculated regarding U.S. and Japanese resolve to defend the islands and their willingness to fight a high-intensity war. Rather than risk the reputational and domestic political damage associated with “sacrificing an inch” of Chinese territory, however, it continued to fight.¹⁴³ Its objectives expanded from achieving a quick victory over Japan that would signal China’s rise to regional preeminence to seeking a victory over the U.S.-Japan alliance that would fundamentally undermine the region’s U.S.-led security architecture. China therefore conducted conventional ballistic and cruise missile strikes against U.S. bases in Guam and Japan that disrupted sortie generation, destroyed more than 40 aircraft (and damaged many more) at three major bases, knocked out two Patriot SAM batteries on Okinawa and severely damaged a U.S. submarine tender moored at Naval Base Guam. The United States responded with a limited number of conventional air strikes and cruise missile attacks against military targets on the Chinese mainland.

PLA strategists viewed the struggle for information superiority as critical to enabling its expanded maritime and air operations and achieving victory in the conflict.¹⁴⁴ China conducted offensive cyberoperations early in the conflict, focusing on U.S. Transportation Command and INDOPACOM networks involved in the flow of forces and logistics to theater and to those involved in C2 and logistics of forward-deployed forces.¹⁴⁵ As China expanded the conflict, its joint air and missile strikes, offensive cyberoperations, anti-satellite attacks, and information operations focused on U.S. C2 and ISR systems. These operations featured nonkinetic attacks and kinetic attacks that produced limited debris (China avoided kinetic ASAT attacks that would generate large amounts of debris).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ China refusing to back down at this stage is plausible because China has outlined inflexible positions on disputes that it considers to be a matter of national sovereignty and territorial integrity and has, in the past, sought to escalate in some cases to improve its negotiating position to end a conflict (Zhen Liu, “China Won’t Concede an Inch, Xi Jinping Tells US Defence Chief Jim Mattis on South China Sea and Taiwan,” *South China Morning Post*, June 26, 2018; Mastro, 2018).

¹⁴⁴ For more on the centrality of information warfare in Chinese thinking about future military operations, see Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1708-OSD, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ These attacks are assumed to target logistical weak points in both the “mobility triad” of “sealift, airlift, and prepositioned assets” and the information systems that support complex logistical trains (Defense Science Board, *Final Report of the Defense Science Board (DSB) Task Force on Survivable Logistics—Executive Summary*, 2018).

¹⁴⁶ For a discussion of China’s counterspace capabilities, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2019.

The United States similarly sought to degrade Chinese ISR and make it more difficult for China to locate U.S. forces. Therefore, the United States conducted both air and missile strikes against Chinese ISR capabilities based in mainland China and nonkinetic attacks against Chinese space-based and terrestrial ISR systems. The United States also conducted offensive cyberoperations against military targets in China to disrupt PLA operations associated with C2 of air and missile operations.¹⁴⁷ U.S. space and cyberoperations interfered with Chinese ISR and C2, making it more difficult for China to locate and attack U.S. surface ships and other forces.¹⁴⁸

The United States initially attempted to reduce the escalation risks associated with mainland strikes by focusing its attacks on forces and installations directly involved in the campaign, mostly located in the PLA's Eastern Theater Command. As the United States shifted its focus to degrading China's military power more generally, however, it attacked a wider range of military targets across multiple PLA Theater Commands, notably by suppressing elements of China's IADS to more effectively strike its surface ships and advanced aircraft, conventional C2 nodes, counterspace and long-range precision strike systems, air bases, and ports.¹⁴⁹ The United States did not attack strategic targets that it considered likely to increase the risk of nuclear escalation—such as nuclear C2, early warning systems, nuclear forces, nuclear and hydroelectric power stations, and leadership compounds. In the context of the ongoing degradation of its IADS, the United States inadvertently struck several Chinese theater nuclear missile launchers on a PLARF base. Chinese leaders feared that the United States was on the verge of conducting conventional nuclear counterforce operations. China therefore placed PLARF nuclear forces on a higher level of alert to deter any further U.S. attacks against its nuclear capabilities.¹⁵⁰ The United States added new restrictions to its operations to prevent inadvertent attacks against China's nuclear forces but reiterated its willingness to use nuclear weapons in response to any Chinese nuclear first use and continued to conduct strikes aimed at degrading Chinese air and naval capabilities.

Roughly three months into the East China Sea campaign, the United States had caused significant damage to China's military (while suffering notable losses of its own) but had not yet fully degraded Chinese air defense systems to an extent that would enable much more widespread, rapid damage to other Chinese military assets. Concerned that such a U.S. breakthrough could be imminent, China decided to impose costs on the United States to enhance Beijing's position and bring the United States to the negotiating table. As a result, it conducted offensive cyberoperations against critical infrastructure in Hawaii and the continental United

¹⁴⁷ For an open-source analysis of the U.S.-Chinese military balance in cyberspace, see Heginbotham et al., 2015.

¹⁴⁸ We assume that the United States puts significant effort toward these operations, which contributes to a positive outcome. In reality, it is unclear how effective U.S. operations against China's ISR and C2 capabilities would be.

¹⁴⁹ Attacks on China's IADS would likely be necessary over the course of this scenario to facilitate strikes that require the penetration of Chinese airspace. Previous RAND analysis has examined both the difficulty of these operations and potential targets (see Heginbotham et al., 2015).

¹⁵⁰ The logic of such inadvertent escalation is analyzed by, among others, Talmadge, 2017; and Vincent A. Manzo, "After the First Shots: Managing Escalation in Northeast Asia," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Vol. 77, 2nd Quarter 2015.

States, causing temporary power and communications outages in multiple U.S. cities. The United States had previously restrained itself from conducting similar operations; it wanted to deter—or, at least, not encourage—Chinese attacks on the U.S. mainland. In response to China’s escalation, however, the United States used cyberattacks to degrade and disrupt power plants and energy transmission systems near major military bases, ports, and airfields to disrupt Chinese operations.

Following this round of escalation, China approached the United States about a potential cease-fire, but Washington refused. Publicly, the United States demanded that China first agree to renounce its claims against the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which China quickly rejected. Privately, the United States preferred to continue fighting until it had succeeded in degrading a larger share of PLA capabilities, which it believed it was on the verge of doing. In many ways, the logic followed U.S. thinking in 1991 when the United States sought Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait but also sought to degrade Iraq’s military so that it would not be powerful enough to undertake territorial aggression again in the future.¹⁵¹

As fighting continued, China lost space situational awareness. Moreover, many of its other counterspace weapons—such as high-powered microwave and laser systems—were suppressed or proved ineffective because of U.S. countermeasures or defenses. As a result, it increasingly relied on kinetic counterspace systems, including direct-ascent anti-satellite (DA-ASAT) weapons, to degrade U.S. ISR and communications satellites.¹⁵² Its decision to do so surprised Washington, which had predicted that Chinese decisionmakers would be less risk-tolerant regarding the creation of debris. However, the Central Military Commission (CMC) considered DA-ASAT strikes to be proportionate and justified in response to ongoing U.S. kinetic attacks on China’s own space control systems. Moreover, CMC leaders hoped that the attacks would help coerce the United States into terminating the conflict—or, at least, improve the deteriorating conventional balance of forces by regaining the “space battlefield initiative.”¹⁵³ As a result, China’s political-military leadership considered the generation of hundreds of thousands of

¹⁵¹ For a discussion of U.S. goals during Operation Desert Storm, see Carl H. Builder, Steven C. Bankes, and Richard Nordin, *Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-775-OSD, 1999.

¹⁵² For discussions of Chinese ASAT counterspace systems, see Todd Harrison, Kaitlyn Johnson, Thomas G. Roberts, Tyler Way, and Makena Young, *Space Threat Assessment 2020*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 30, 2020; and Defense Intelligence Agency, *Challenges to Security in Space*, Washington, D.C., 2019a.

¹⁵³ For discussions of when China might choose to use kinetic counterspace operations, see Paul Szymanski, “Techniques for Great Power Space War,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2019; and Steve Lambakis, “A Guide for Thinking About Space Deterrence and China,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 38, No. 6, 2019. Analyses of China’s concepts for military operations in space include Mark Stokes, Gabriel Alvarado, Emily Weinstein, and Ian Easton, *China’s Space and Counterspace Capabilities and Activities*, Arlington, Va.: Project 2049 Institute, March 30, 2020; and Kevin L. Pollpeter, Michael S. Chase, and Eric Heginbotham, *The Creation of the PLA Strategic Support Force and Its Implications for Chinese Military Space Operations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2058-AF, 2017.

pieces of trackable debris in LEO and millions of pieces of smaller debris a heavy but necessary price to pay. These attacks succeeded in severely degrading the United States' space-based ISR capabilities and generating substantial debris in LEO. The United States responded by intensifying its own nonkinetic counterspace operations to deny China any ISR advantage.

Russian Entry into Conflict

Prior to the conflict, Russia and China had built an increasingly cooperative partnership to balance against the United States, which they both saw as their primary security threat. When the conflict commenced, however, they had not overcome their differences enough to enable deeper military cooperation or a military alliance. Russia monitored the conflict closely and provided China with intelligence and with arms and energy sales. As the fighting continued, Russia became increasingly concerned about allied successes and Washington's apparent war aims, believing that a serious Chinese loss could threaten Russia by allowing the United States to focus its resources more heavily on countering Russia. As the conflict extended into a fourth month and Chinese losses mounted, Russia began covert discussions with China about increasing support and then openly warned the United States that continued allied operations would be considered damaging to regional stability and Russia's interests.

The United States, for its part, had correctly assessed the limits to peacetime Sino-Russian cooperation. However, Washington failed to anticipate how the expansion of U.S. war aims and U.S. wartime success would change Russian calculations. When Russia threatened to enter the conflict in support of China (and even began making some preparations to do so), the United States dismissed Russian moves as a bluff.¹⁵⁴ Japan had greater concerns regarding Russia's threats and pressured the United States to develop plans for cease-fire options that would be acceptable to all sides. Tokyo remained pleased with the success of allied operations and the damage to China's future warmaking potential but was increasingly concerned about the escalatory direction of the conflict.

As the conflict entered its fifth month, it became clear that the United States and Japan had fundamentally degraded PLA air defense systems and begun to inflict enough damage on China's air and naval capabilities to change the regional balance of power. Moscow sought and gained assurances from Beijing that Russian military assistance to China would result in an enhanced postwar PRC-Russia economic partnership. Russia then entered the conflict beginning with cyberoperations, electronic warfare, and counterspace actions in an effort to disrupt U.S. confidence in their systems and also maximize the impacts of their kinetic attacks, which began

¹⁵⁴ On the general tendency for leaders to misinterpret the meaning of new information that conflicts with previously formed assessments, see Jervis, 1976.

soon thereafter. Russia justified its actions as an effort to limit Chinese losses, claiming that the United States and Japan were using a local dispute as pretext for a preventive war.¹⁵⁵

Once Russia got involved, Russian bombers, ground-based systems, and submarines conducted conventional cruise missile strikes against U.S. and Japan Air Self-Defense Force bases in northern Japan and Alaska. Russia also conducted extensive nonkinetic electronic warfare and cyberoperations against U.S. military targets in the region. The kinetic attacks inflicted serious damage on fuel storage and parked aircraft at Misawa Air Base, Chitose Air Base, and Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, where more than a dozen bomber, tanker, and transport aircraft were destroyed. Russia conducted offensive cyberoperations against both regional military targets and critical infrastructure targets in the United States (including the U.S. power grid), causing additional damage that hampered efforts to normalize service after the earlier Chinese cyberattacks. Some Japanese politicians agitated for a military expedition to take the disputed Kuril Islands back from Russia, but the government considered the risks to be too great and instead put increasing pressure on the United States to seek cease-fire negotiations.¹⁵⁶

The United States, in response, attacked Russian surface ships in the region, launched conventional air and missile strikes against military targets in the Russian Far East, and conducted offensive cyberoperations against military and critical infrastructure targets in Russia, disrupting logistics flows and port operations. Russia responded by placing its nuclear forces on alert and issuing a statement indicating that the alert was intended to deter any further escalation by the United States.¹⁵⁷ U.S. leaders were not looking for a wider war with Russia, and they judged the additional weeks of war had already allowed them to achieve their strategic objective of substantially degrading Chinese power, although further conflict would bring fewer benefits and greater costs. As the war passed the five-month mark, the United States accepted a Chinese and Russian proposal for a cease-fire.

¹⁵⁵ For the factors that inform Russian decisions regarding whether to intervene in foreign conflicts, see Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019. An overview of Russia's security policies and threat perceptions is provided in Andrew Radin, Lynn E. Davis, Edward Geist, Eugeniu Han, Dara Massicot, Matthew Povlock, Clint Reach, Scott Boston, Samuel Charap, William Mackenzie, Katya Migacheva, Trevor Johnston, and Austin Long, *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3099-A, 2019. More generally, the drivers of Russo-Chinese relations (including mutual security interests) are discussed in Robert Sutter, *China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and U.S. Policy Options*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 73, September 2018.

¹⁵⁶ The "Southern Kurils" or "Northern Territories" dispute remains a central obstacle in Russo-Japanese relations. A minority of Japanese lawmakers have suggested that the Japan Self Defense Forces (JSDF) might be used in the future to take them back (see Ivan Tselichtchev, "Will Russia and Japan Ever Reach an Agreement over the Kuril Islands?" *South China Morning Post*, January 28, 2019; and "Japan Skirts Question About Possibility of SDF Dispatch to Russian-Held Islands off Hokkaido," *Japan Times*, November 30, 2019).

¹⁵⁷ For the use of nuclear threats and signaling in Russian military thought, see Dmitri Trenin, *Decoding Russia's Official Nuclear Deterrence Paper*, Carnegie Moscow Center, June 5, 2020; and Anna Davis, *Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period Until 2030*, Newport, R.I.: Russia Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, 2017.

Conflict Conclusion

The U.S.-Japan alliance was victorious in resolving the immediate issues at stake in the conflict: China was prevented from occupying the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, establishing a *cordon sanitaire*, and China's military power was set back substantially. However, the later effects of the war were much more complex than the U.S. military victory would suggest.

Under the negotiated agreement, all parties ceased combat operations and China agreed to withdraw both military and paramilitary forces from the area around the disputed islands. Japan's conventional forces also withdrew, and (under U.S. pressure) Tokyo agreed to hold future discussions with China regarding resource rights and lines of control and demarcation in the East China Sea. Still, Japan maintained JCG patrols in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and did not recognize any Chinese claim to the islands themselves. Washington pressured Tokyo to be open to granting China concessions in these talks, to keep Beijing at the table and prevent a return to conflict. Although China participated in these confidence-building measures (CBMs), its behavior in the months and years following made clear that it had accepted neither Japanese sovereignty nor its defeat in the conflict in the manner that Washington and Tokyo had hoped.

China, Japan, and the United States all suffered heavy losses in the war, which represented the first instance of high-intensity maritime-aerospace conflict in the Pacific since 1945. Large portions of China's navy (approximately 55 percent of its destroyer, frigate, and cruiser fleet and 40 percent of its submarines) were sunk, one of its aircraft carriers was destroyed, and its air force suffered heavy attrition (50 percent of its fourth- and fifth-generation fighter inventory and 40 percent of its bombers). The United States and Japan also suffered considerable losses (about 15 percent and 25 percent, respectively, of their surface ships and aircraft in the theater). Damage to space systems was also heavy and would require an extensive reconstitution of LEO-based ISR and C2 capabilities, in particular. Russia suffered fewer losses because of its late entry into the conflict, but Vladivostok port and Russian Pacific Fleet infrastructure were badly damaged.¹⁵⁸

Key Issues in the Conflict Period

This section discusses two key aspects of the conflict in more detail: how political alignments evolved and the role of airpower during the war.

¹⁵⁸ Modeling this conflict to determine combat losses was outside the scope of this study. As a basis for the postwar analysis, we arrived at these notional estimates using likely attrition rates for high-intensity combat between the main forces that China and the United States would bring to bear over the course of a four- to six-month conflict. For the types and number of forces that would likely be involved and a rough correlation of forces, see Heginbotham et al., 2015; and Easton et al., 2017.

Political Alignments and Allied Contributions Throughout the Conflict

As had occurred in past great power wars, the conflict expanded as it dragged on. China had launched a gray-zone operation with the hope of keeping the United States out of the conflict, but its actions backfired. Once the war escalated, China used diplomacy and promises of future economic deals in an attempt to gain Russian military support, but Moscow avoided commitment until it became apparent that Chinese losses would be severe enough to change the balance of power in East Asia and potentially enhance U.S. power on Russia's eastern flank. Russian entry into the conflict, therefore, was an unexpected development for all sides but one that helped bring an end to the conflict and forestall even heavier Chinese losses. As a result of the conflict's largely ad hoc character, aggravated by interoperability problems and a lack of peacetime training for fighting under a joint command structure, Beijing and Moscow did not deeply coordinate their operations.¹⁵⁹ Rather, Russia focused on supplementing in areas that were beyond China's capabilities, such as long-range strikes.

China refused North Korea's offer to conduct wide-ranging cyberattacks on the United States, fearing that it could lead to conflict escalation that China would be unable to control. Although China economically had long supported North Korea to bolster it against regime collapse—one of Beijing's greatest fears—China mistrusted North Korean behavior and objectives with regard to the United States, giving Beijing pause in accepting Pyongyang's offer to help in the conflict.¹⁶⁰

At the outset of the conflict, the United States tried to gain the support of key regional allies and partners for the war and prevent China from accessing materials and resources that it would need to sustain an increasingly lengthy and draining conflict. The United States also reassured allies that support for U.S. operations and a defeat for China would help with other outstanding regional territorial issues—both in terms of U.S. support for allies' positions on territorial disputes with China and in terms of a weakened China less likely to be able to successfully pursue its claims. At the same time, China threatened future economic relationships and hinted at military retaliation for those who supported the United States, while also stating that the United States was the aggressor in the conflict and that China had sought to resolve territorial disputes in a fair and un confrontational manner.

U.S. regional allies and partners were nervous that Chinese actions to gain control of the islands, if successful, could embolden Beijing to use military force to resolve its other territorial

¹⁵⁹ Open-source analysis supporting the plausibility of this conclusion includes Dmitry Gorenburg, *Emerging Strategic Partnership: Russia-China Military Cooperation*, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria: Marshall European Center for Security Studies Security Insights, April 2020; James D. J. Brown, *China-Russia Naval Cooperation in East Asia: Implications for Japan*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, March 26, 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Andrew Scobell, "China and North Korea: Bolstering a Buffer or Hunkering Down in Northeast Asia?" testimony presented before the U.S. China Security and Economic Review Commission on June 8, 2017, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-477, 2017; Eleanor Albert, *The North Korea-China Relationship*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, June 25, 2019.

claims in the region—especially in the South China Sea. Given these concerns, when the United States joined the conflict, allies and partners provided support in intelligence-sharing, ISR, and logistics operations for U.S. forces transiting to the conflict. However, these countries refused to allow U.S. use of their territories for offensive operations, fearing Chinese retaliation. The reluctance to support U.S. offensive operations increased once the United States rejected China’s initial cease-fire option.

Despite a long-standing tense relationship with Japan, South Korea wanted to support the alliance with the United States. It allowed storage of U.S. military equipment and materiel and provided support for a small number of U.S. ISR flights operating from bases in Korea, although it refused to allow any U.S. offensive strikes against China to come from bases on its territory.¹⁶¹ South Korea viewed the outcome of the conflict as important for its own territorial disputes with China in the Yellow Sea, and therefore provided a more robust level of support for the United States.¹⁶² Singapore agreed to provide access for limited U.S. military presence, allowing U.S. forces to station navy vessels and anti-submarine aircraft on its bases, and provided limited logistical and intelligence support for U.S. operations (basically in keeping with normal peacetime U.S. activity in Singapore). The Philippines was reluctant to allow basing for U.S. forces carrying out offensive combat operations but did allow U.S. forces access to its bases and ports to repair a limited number of ships and aircraft.¹⁶³ Australia played a more active role in the belief that U.S. strategic and economic influence in the region not only helped promote a rules-based order but also acted as a counterweight to China’s growing assertiveness and military modernization. Australia allowed U.S. forces to use its northern bases and sent several destroyers to support the United States and Japan.¹⁶⁴

NATO allies tried to minimize their role in the conflict. France—which in the years prior to the conflict had embarked on a bilateral road map with Japan to improve cooperation in maritime security, space, cybersecurity, and infrastructure to address China’s expanding regional influence—viewed the conflict with particular concern. The French government publicly denounced the Chinese role in its initiation.¹⁶⁵ Germany, which continued to count China as its

¹⁶¹ Harold et al., 2019. South Korea’s defense budget has earmarked significant resources to upgrading its ISR capabilities; see Jeff Jeong, “South Korea Could Soon Take Control of Its Own Wartime Operations from the US,” *Defense News*, November 1, 2018.

¹⁶² Ben Dolvin, Marylin Manyin, and Shirley Kan, *Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia: Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R42930, 2014.

¹⁶³ Philippines, Office of the President, *National Security Strategy 2018: Security and Development for Transformational Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People*, Manila, Philippines, 2018; Charmaine G. Misalucha and Julio S. Amador III, “U.S.-Philippines Security Ties: Building New Foundations?” *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2016.

¹⁶⁴ For a discussion on the importance of U.S. military presence to Australia’s strategic interests, refer to Australian Government, Department of Defence, 2020a.

¹⁶⁵ “Japan and France to Unveil Road Map for Cooperation Amid China’s Rise,” *Japan Times*, June 18, 2019.

largest trade partner, publicly voiced concern about the need to uphold principles of international order, including sovereignty and territorial integrity, and urged all parties to exhibit restraint.¹⁶⁶

The United States initiated Article V discussions once Russia attacked Alaska. Although European leaders feared being dragged into a global conflict, they recognized that the attacks on Alaska justified invocation of Article V.¹⁶⁷ European governments did not commit forces to the Pacific theater, but they did prepare for potential Russian retaliatory actions against U.S. or European assets in the Baltic Sea and the High North. Supreme Allied Commander-Europe (SACEUR) mobilized NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), sending troops to flight lines to await orders for takeoff, but the North Atlantic Council (NAC) never authorized deployment.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, European militaries mobilized naval surface and submarine assets, but did not deploy them to theater, although Canadian fighter aircraft and naval vessels deployed to bolster the defense of Alaska following the Russian attack. Additional air assets were placed on NATO Quick Reaction Alert as European air forces prepared for potential air defense responsibilities and for possible strike roles if the conflict continued to escalate.

Throughout the war, the United States used diplomatic efforts to stop the flow of energy resources and other raw materials to China but did not implement a blockade. However, U.S. diplomacy, combined with the risks of transiting a warzone, substantially reduced the amount of trade reaching China, forcing the country to rely substantially on domestic reserves for the duration of the conflict and institute widespread rationing among its civilian population. Overland trade from Russia and Central Asia was less affected, and overland trade in oil and foodstuffs continued more broadly, albeit with some disruptions.

Role of Airpower During the Conflict

The role of airpower was extensive in this scenario. China employed ballistic and cruise missile strikes against targets in Japan and the Marianas beginning quite early in the conflict. The initial focus was on strikes against U.S. air bases and associated C2 facilities, radar installations, key air defenses, and fuel storage sites. These were followed by attacks to further degrade and destroy logistics, C2, ISR, and IADS capabilities. PLAAF fighters and bombers conducted surge

¹⁶⁶ Kitty Donaldson and Joe Mayes, "No 'Business as Usual' With China After Covid-19, U.K. Says," Bloomberg, April 16, 2020.

¹⁶⁷ NATO's founding treaty defines the area covered by collective defense responsibilities as "Europe and North America," encompassing "the land territories of the Parties, including North Atlantic islands if located north of the Tropic of Cancer; their forces in and above that same region and in the Mediterranean Sea." According to one author at the NATO Defense College, therefore, Article V "could not be invoked after the Gulf of Tonkin incident (1964), the Pueblo incident (1968), or the invasion of the Falkland Islands (1982). Neither could it be invoked in the future in case of an aggression by an Asian country against Hawaii, for instance (but could be invoked in case of a missile attack against Alaska)." Bruno Tertrais, *Article 5 of the Washington Treaty: Its Origins, Meaning and Future*, Rome, Italy: NATO Defense College, 2016.

¹⁶⁸ SACEUR is authorized to mobilize, but not deploy, the VJTF prior to NAC authorization. John Vandiver, "Politics of Deployment Pose Challenge for NATO's New Spearhead Force," *Stars and Stripes*, July 1, 2015.

operations to establish air superiority and facilitate sea control operations over air and sea exclusion zones to the north, south, and east of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. As the conflict escalated, China used PLARF intermediate-range ballistic missiles and PLAAF bombers armed with cruise missiles to attack other regional targets. When Russia entered the conflict, it relied heavily on long-range cruise missile strikes delivered by its bombers and naval vessels and on long-range fighter sorties to threaten the U.S. air bridge over the northern Pacific.

The U.S. goal in this conflict, beyond increasing the costs of a Chinese occupation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, was to inflict such heavy losses on Chinese naval and air forces that Beijing's ability to project power against other states would be significantly reduced. Chinese ships at sea were relatively vulnerable to destruction by the U.S. and Japanese navies and air forces, but striking the much larger proportions of PLAN and PLAAF assets that remained under the cover of China's IADS and other area-denial capabilities was more challenging, given the capabilities of China's long-range land-based and naval SAMs and the numerical strength of its fighter forces. LRASM anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) were the weapons of choice for USAF and U.S. Navy aircraft to use against ships along the Chinese coast but were few in number relative to their demand. Attacking Chinese air bases to attrite PLAAF aircraft based at locations not conveniently close to the coast required either penetrating or suppressing the main belt of the Chinese IADS. Russia's entry into the conflict did not constitute an escalation in the difficulty of carrying out these missions (given the relative weakness of Russian forces in the Far East), but it did stretch U.S. and allied forces more thinly. Russian involvement also posed threats of attack against Japanese bases from the north and east in addition to strikes from China. As in the scenario described in Chapter 2, the U.S. ability to generate sorties from bases that were subject to Chinese and Russian missile attacks was problematic throughout the campaign.

Narrative of Post-Conflict Developments

The 2027 war left China in a precarious position. Its military had suffered substantial, disproportionate losses in the conflict, and China found itself in a military position clearly inferior to that of the United States and its allies in Asia. Although Chinese censors hid the true extent of the damage from the Chinese public, Chinese media extensively covered U.S. strikes on the mainland and that coverage was replete with stories of the deaths of patriotic Chinese airmen and sailors who had given their lives in an effort to protect China against U.S. imperialism. The result, throughout early 2028, was an explosion of nationalist rage in China, aimed at the United States and Japan and carefully directed away from the CCP. Widespread protests and destruction of U.S. governmental and commercial facilities occurred in most major Chinese cities, and authorities made little effort to stop them.

This upsurge in nationalist feeling combined with acute perceptions of strategic vulnerability to lead Beijing to two key decisions that shaped the postwar environment. The first was to accept a Russian offer of a formal mutual defense pact. Russia had come to China's aid in the war,

albeit in a self-interested effort to limit Chinese losses and prevent the reemergence of a clear U.S. global hegemony. But the rationale for a closer military alliance persisted after the war, and the positive feelings from having fought together against the United States, albeit only for a matter of weeks, helped overcome residual concerns that the two sides had regarding one another's intentions.

The second major Chinese decision was to aggressively and rapidly rebuild its military forces in an effort to ensure that the United States and its allies could not similarly threaten Chinese national security in the future. The potential for a second defeat at the hands of the Americans was considered likely to threaten the CCP's hold on power in China. Furthermore, although the United States had attempted to avoid critical regime or nuclear C2 targets during the conflict, it had not always been successful in doing so, and Chinese leaders were shaken by the potential for the United States to undertake regime decapitation strikes in the future. This rearmament push led to a dramatic shift in Chinese resources. Military spending was doubled as a percentage of GDP over the subsequent five years; combined with the need for economic recovery from the war, this led to a substantial reduction in resources for China's global outreach, including its BRI efforts. There was a sense in Beijing that China had moved to expand its global influence too quickly—before it had addressed its security vulnerabilities closer to home.

The United States, for its part, initially attempted to take a conciliatory approach toward China after the war, encouraging Japan to pursue commercial agreements with China for joint development of resources around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, pressuring Taiwan to avoid steps toward independence, and avoiding any provocative military or economic steps in the region to avoid the perception that it was forcing China to accept victor's justice. Washington hoped that it could entice China to accept its status as a militarily inferior power in Asia as a basis for future reconciliation and cooperation. China, however, was not interested in this effort. As the United States began to understand the scope and durability of Chinese anger and rearmament efforts, it was forced to change course and begin to prepare its own military for a likely future confrontation with a rearmed, antagonistic China.

The intensified U.S.-China competition in Asia became increasingly uncomfortable for other states in the region. China had come to view as unacceptable the preference of many states in Asia to simultaneously pursue economic partnerships with China and security partnerships with the United States. China increasingly viewed the presence of any U.S. forces in the region as a security threat and became willing to apply tremendous pressure on states to make them deny U.S. military access. In 2029, China executed a near-complete shutdown in Chinese trade, investment, and tourism with the Philippines until that state revoked its Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, promising at the same time to defer efforts to settle disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea. In the face of tremendous economic costs—and less worried in any event about now-reduced Chinese naval capabilities—Manila agreed. The last U.S. forces left the archipelago in 2030. China applied similar tactics to other states in Asia throughout 2029 and 2030, succeeding in limiting or rolling back U.S. military

access throughout Southeast Asia but failing to end U.S. alliances and access in South Korea or Australia (although those states did suspend their participation in visible, large-scale military exercises to avoid antagonizing Beijing).

By 2030, the United States assessed that although it retained a military edge over China in Asia, that edge was quickly eroding in the face of China's rapid, sustained increases in defense spending and closer partnership with Russia. Washington felt it had little choice but to continue to increase its own defense spending to maintain this edge. Some close allies—notably Japan, the UK, and France—shared U.S. concerns about the future trajectory and took steps to increase their own capabilities, but the perception of military threat from China was not widely accepted: China increasingly concentrated its rhetoric and aggressive actions more narrowly on the United States and Japan, deemphasizing its disputes with other states. For the United States, no broader coalition of partners to oppose China's rise had materialized. If anything, China confronted a less resolute coalition of states than it had in 2027, leaving Washington increasingly concerned about the risks and potential outcome of a repeat conflict that seemed likely in the years to come.

Key Issues in the Post-Conflict Environment

Territorial and Major Domestic Political Change

There were no territorial changes or substantial political regime changes as a result of the war. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands remained under Japanese administration, and China maintained its claim to them. Other states, notably the United States, refrained from taking formal positions on the territorial dispute, instead urging all sides to find peaceful means of resolving the dispute in the future. China and Japan, particularly in the months immediately following the war, did take some limited bilateral steps to manage escalation in the area of the islands, such as upgraded hotlines.¹⁶⁹ The two countries also relied on regularly scheduled meetings between their coast guards to discuss rules for maritime encounters, and they scheduled ministerial-level meetings to discuss resource extraction or exploration, fishing issues, and maritime lines of demarcation.¹⁷⁰ There was no return flare-up in tensions over the next five years, although the extent to which this was attributable to these limited CBMs was unclear.

As we discuss later in this chapter, there were no substantial changes in the regimes of any of the major participants as a result of the war, although popular discontent was pronounced in China both during and after the conflict. China watchers speculated about how this anger might affect the stability of the current regime. The conflict was largely seen as a debacle within the top leadership, raising the possibility that Xi Jinping might be replaced by a new top leader, perhaps even before the next congress. Xi was not unseated, but he faced a clear loss of power and

¹⁶⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, "Tensions in the East China Sea," webpage, undated.

¹⁷⁰ Lyle Morris, "The New 'Normal' in the East China Sea," *RAND Blog*, February 27, 2017.

influence. Importantly, it appeared unlikely that he would control the process to select his successor.¹⁷¹ Despite popular unrest and maneuvering within the top leadership, no viable opposition to the CCP arose in China, and public protests and demonstrations remained more focused on anti-U.S. and anti-Japanese themes than on anger at the CCP leadership. However, popular dissatisfaction did shape the strategic approach that Beijing chose to pursue in the aftermath of the war, which will be discussed later.

Resulting Distribution of Power and Capabilities

China's military was substantially weakened by its losses of personnel and equipment during the war. PRC industrial capacity was also degraded, especially along the coast where the United States struck large fixed targets, such as shipbuilding facilities. However, China had significant commercial shipbuilding capacity before the war, and U.S. targeting had focused on China's extant military capabilities more than industrial capacity.¹⁷² Moreover, the United States had not targeted industrial facilities beyond the coastal areas, which were seen as posing a greater escalation risk. China's economy was affected by trade disruptions during the war, but, on net, China's defense industrial capacity, critical infrastructure, and economy remained largely intact. This capacity, in turn, enabled China to undertake a rapid rebuilding of its military capabilities, as discussed later in this chapter.

In the years immediately following the war, however, Chinese relative power in East Asia had clearly declined. Many analysts had assumed that the United States had no ability to reverse the changes in the balance of power that had occurred in China's favor over the past two decades, but the war enabled the United States to do just this—albeit only temporarily. In the 2028–2030 period, the United States reestablished a dominant military position in East Asia, and China's ability to militarily coerce its neighbors was diminished. China's economic leverage was reduced from what it had been during the prewar period but remained a significant source of influence in the region as its economy recovered. By 2030, however, this U.S. advantage had begun to ebb. The United States, although it did increase defense spending of its own, proved unable to match the military rebuilding effort of a China now willing to commit a larger share of its GDP to defense. The long-term military trends for the United States in the post-2030 era looked perhaps even more worrying than they had before the war.

¹⁷¹ Rather than nominating a handpicked replacement for formal approval, he was expected to have to settle for a relatively anodyne candidate who lacked a significant independent political power base but held policy preferences broadly acceptable to other senior CCP leaders, including those in the PLA.

¹⁷² For an overview of China's shipbuilding capacity, see Gabriel Collins and Michael C. Grubb, *A Comprehensive Survey of China's Dynamic Shipbuilding Industry*, Newport, R.I.: U.S. Naval War College, 2008; Tom Waldwyn and Nick Childs, "China's Naval Shipbuilding: Delivering on Its Ambition in a Big Way," *Military Balance*, May 1, 2018; Congressional Research Service, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C., RL33153, August 24, 2020d; and Andrew S. Erickson, ed., *Chinese Naval Shipbuilding: An Ambitious and Uncertain Course*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2016.

Counterspace Implications

China's decision to conduct kinetic ASAT operations incurred significant international criticism, especially because it made LEO a much more dangerous operating environment for all states both during and after the war.¹⁷³ Because China used its DA-ASAT weapons primarily against lower-altitude U.S. and Japanese satellites, most of the debris generated burned up within a few months of the conflict, but it still caused some cascading collisions with other space assets—including communication satellite mega constellations—in a self-reinforcing process that appeared likely to continue for decades or longer. Moreover, some of the debris generated in the initial and subsequent impacts was lofted to much higher altitudes, where it would continue to pose a hazard to spaceflight for hundreds (or even thousands) of years.¹⁷⁴ This increased the overall cost of commercial use of space through a variety of mechanisms ranging from higher insurance rates to lower expected lifespans of satellite systems, leading to a renewed interest in developing terrestrial alternatives to some satellite systems and driving out of the market those companies that were less efficient or not as well financed. The more hostile operating environment incentivized governments to invest in more-distributed, maneuverable, and cheaper satellite systems and to increasingly seek out ways of embedding clandestine or military systems on commercial satellites.

Furthermore, there was a significant surge in governmental interest in space debris removal technologies. Many nonbelligerent nations believed that China—and, to a lesser extent, the United States—had a responsibility for remediating the LEO damage, which might have had significant and lingering economic consequences if it made LEO too hostile an environment for certain forms of commercial exploitation.¹⁷⁵

Cyberspace Implications

Both sides demonstrated an initial aversion to cyberattacks on civilian targets—China because it feared the political repercussions of mass social disruption, and the United States because it was concerned about escalation and economic damage.¹⁷⁶ Later attacks on critical

¹⁷³ Even very small (and thus largely not trackable) pieces of debris can prove deadly for systems in LEO because of their immense kinetic energy. A piece of debris the size of a BB, for example, can carry more kinetic energy than a rifle bullet. Aerospace Corporation, “Space Debris and Space Traffic Management,” November 14, 2018.

¹⁷⁴ This occurred with both China's 2007 and India's 2019 ASAT tests. Rose, April 2020.

¹⁷⁵ A similar dynamic already exists in the global provision of space situational awareness, which has historically been largely the remit of the United States and Russia—who, for most of the past seven decades, have dominated production of the debris in orbit. A useful analysis of trends in space situational awareness and space traffic management is Bhavya Lal, Asha Balakrishnan, Becaja M. Caldwell, Reina S. Buenconsejo, and Sara A. Carioscia, *Global Trends in Space Situational Awareness (SSA) and Space Traffic Management (STM)*, Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, D-9074, 2018.

¹⁷⁶ For more on sources of U.S. aversion to cyberattacks likely to cause significant civilian disruption and on escalation dynamics in cyberspace, see Lawrence J. Cavaiola, David C. Gompert, and Martin Libicki, “Cyber House Rules: On War, Retaliation and Escalation,” *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2015.

infrastructure caused tens of billions of dollars of economic damage.¹⁷⁷ The effectiveness of Chinese attacks in disrupting U.S. power grids in some cities came as a shock to the U.S. public—although the attacks were less effective than some experts had feared. Furthermore, these attacks raised fears that the United States and China might gain greater cyber capabilities in the future, enough to destroy one another’s financial systems and cripple each other’s critical infrastructure in a future war. This led to a postwar emphasis in both countries on cybersecurity. The conflict also motivated China to modify its no-first-use nuclear policy, as discussed later, partly to deter future cyberattacks on China’s critical infrastructure and partly to increase investments in a system for transforming China’s internet into a highly compartmentalized national intranet that could defend key Chinese systems from cyberattacks.¹⁷⁸

China’s Grand Strategy

The substantial destruction of PLA forces, along with the unexpectedly aggressive U.S. approach in prosecuting the war, forced China to reconsider its strategic approach after 2027. This reconsideration was informed by domestic political dynamics as well. Popular Chinese reaction to the conflict reflected intense anger at the United States and Japan both for frustrating Chinese ambitions in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and for inflicting such widespread damage and casualties on the PLA. Violent protests aimed at American symbols, such as embassies, consulates, and prominent commercial brands, continued for months after the conflict, and authorities showed little inclination to reign them in. Instead, Chinese officials decided on a substantially more assertive, aggressive approach toward the United States designed to harness this discontent. Chinese strategy focused on eliminating the possibility of suffering a similar humiliation in the future, fearing that a second defeat would threaten the survival of the regime.

To do so, Beijing substantially increased its defense spending as a percentage of GDP, which came at the expense of resources available for overseas investment. From a prewar average of 2 percent of GDP, Chinese defense spending increased dramatically over the 2028–2030 period; by 2030, Chinese spending had reached sustained levels of 4 percent of GDP, its highest level in decades.¹⁷⁹ As a result, new Chinese BRI projects were substantially reduced and those already underway came under greater pressure to realize returns. The necessity of such trade-offs had

¹⁷⁷ This estimate represents the expected consequences of relatively restrained cyberattacks on the United States. Previous RAND studies of the consequences of war with China have cited estimates of large-scale cyberattacks on the United States causing from \$70 billion to 900 billion in damage, with similar (and perhaps even larger) effects on China attendant to symmetric U.S. retaliation (Gompert, Cevallos, and Garafola, 2016).

¹⁷⁸ Open-source reports suggest that China has already made significant progress toward this objective (Dave Allen, “Analysis by Oracle Internet Intelligence Highlights China’s Unique Approach to Connecting to the Global Internet,” Oracle Internet Intelligence, blog post, July 19, 2019).

¹⁷⁹ This level is also somewhat higher than typical U.S. long-term trends (China Power Team, *What Does China Really Spend on Its Military?* Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 15, 2020b).

become particularly acute by 2030, as China's overall population (particularly its working-age population) declined.¹⁸⁰

Beijing concentrated this sharp increase in defense resources into several areas. It began first with a crash rebuilding program to reconstitute the air defense and other capabilities required to again ensure absolute control of its airspace and territorial waters, including the purchase of Russian S-400 and other SAM systems and advanced attack submarines, along with longer-term investments in indigenous capabilities and production lines. China's shipyards were brought to their full capacity to replenish their fleets, predominantly manufacturing advanced frigates and destroyers. Missile programs were likewise prioritized, and ballistic and cruise missile stocks were scheduled to be replenished in a five-year span. Beijing chose to abandon production of legacy bomber and fighter programs and focused on rapid production of H-20 bombers and next-generation fighters to better compete with U.S. systems. Despite the increase in resources, these production lines—and the advanced supply chains that supported them—were more fragile, and the PLA had difficulty meeting production targets, causing much of the acquisition to stretch through two five-year programs. China enacted a force reduction in the PLA Army to focus on naval and air programs, and ground force modernization was frozen except for a few priority long-range rocket and rotary wing aircraft programs.

As China rebuilt and expanded its air and naval power, it also reconsidered its nuclear policy and strategy. Although the war stayed conventional, prominent Chinese military strategists argued that China needed NSNWs to fill gaps in its military power, deter future aggression, and counter U.S. nuclear coercion. As a result, China developed NSNWs for its naval forces. These consisted of nuclear-armed ASCMs, anti-submarine rockets, and torpedoes for PLAN surface ships and submarines, and nuclear-armed anti-ship missiles for PLA Naval Air Force bombers. China seemed to be copying a page from Russia's playbook, albeit with a much smaller number of NSNWs than were believed to be in service with the Russian Navy.¹⁸¹ About a year and a half after the war, China issued a new white paper on military strategy. The document implied that China would develop NSNWs but indicated that it would not deploy those NSNWs to its land-based missile systems or SSBNs.¹⁸² China also appeared to relax its no-first-use policy by

¹⁸⁰ China Power Team, *Does China Have an Aging Problem?* Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 19, 2020a.

¹⁸¹ Although Russia's NSNW capabilities are not transparent, the Russian Navy appears to be their largest user in the Russian military. The Russian Navy is estimated to have an inventory of 820 tactical warheads, including ASCMs, anti-submarine rockets, and torpedoes (Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons, 2019," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 75, No. 5, 2019c).

¹⁸² There is limited evidence that the development of a new lower-yield Chinese warhead, or at least consideration of such development, has already begun. In particular, the U.S. Department of Defense has noted that "a defense industry publication has also discussed the development of a new low-yield weapon" (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019). Open-source analysis holds that China also already possesses a small number of gravity bombs for use by its H-6K aircraft, although the yield of these weapons is unclear (Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2019," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 75, No. 4, 2019b). Moreover, with the

declaring that, in conflicts with other nuclear states, it reserved the right to use all weapons in its possession to defend itself from attacks that posed a grave threat to its national security, sovereignty, or territorial integrity, and it would develop any means necessary to do so.¹⁸³

Perhaps the most visible shift in Chinese strategy following the war, however, came from changed attitudes toward the United States. Although China had felt for decades that the United States opposed its rise and that there were real risks that Washington would use force to do so, Beijing was nonetheless surprised by both the aggression and effectiveness with which the United States expanded the conflict to substantially degrade overall Chinese military capabilities rather than focusing on the theater of conflict in the East China Sea. This shifted Beijing's thinking on the possibility for near-term tactical accommodation or mutually beneficial exchanges with the United States, instead moving Chinese thinking toward a more aggressive, anti-U.S. approach. This shift was reinforced by widespread popular anger in China at U.S. actions during the war.

In practice, this shift meant a sea change in Chinese attitudes toward economic exchange with the United States and tolerance of the presence of U.S. military forces on its periphery. Chinese investments in the United States were heavily restricted, and U.S. firms in China, which had seen their assets frozen during the war, saw many of these assets nationalized. China made it clear to other states in Asia that it viewed a willingness to host U.S. forces or engage in military exercises with the United States as a signal that these states harbored clear ill intent toward Beijing that was incompatible with a productive economic relationship. China emphasized to such states as Australia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore that the price of continued access to the Chinese market was an end to U.S. military presence or access. China demonstrated its willingness to impose these costs with a 2029 shutdown (lasting for six months) of Chinese trade, tourism, and investment with the Philippines until that country agreed to discontinue its Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States. The reactions of other states to this pressure are discussed later.

PLAAF and PLAN expanding their nuclear mission in the coming years, one recent study concludes, "new capabilities could prompt Chinese nuclear commanders to advocate for a de facto adjustment of nuclear operating concepts, even if the capabilities themselves were not developed specifically for such purposes" (Eric Heginbotham, Jacob L. Heim, and Chris P. Twomey, "Of Bombs and Bureaucrats: Internal Drivers of Nuclear Force Building in China and the United States," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 118, July 4, 2019).

¹⁸³ China has long maintained a negative assurance that, per its 2019 white paper on national defense, it "is always committed to a nuclear policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances" (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019). However, China's strategic community has repeatedly debated over the past two decades whether China should declare circumstances in which its nuclear first use is possible; see Pan Zhenqiang, "A Study of China's No-First-Use Policy on Nuclear Weapons," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2018; Nan Li, "China's Evolving Nuclear Strategy: Will China Drop 'No First Use?'" *China Brief*, Vol. 18, January 12, 2018; and Pan Zhenqiang, "China's No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," in Li Bin and Tong Zhao, eds., *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016. In this scenario, U.S. strikes that inadvertently threaten China's nuclear forces bring these debates to a postwar head, and China chooses to relax its no-first-use policy to deter similar attacks in the future.

Another major change in Chinese grand strategy was a willingness to enter a mutual defense pact with Russia in spite of earlier misgivings. China worked feverishly to rebuild its military to be able to provide for its own defense but was concerned that the United States might seek to exploit China's military weakness in the near term. A mutual defense pact with Russia, China hoped, would deter another U.S. attack or U.S. coercion by increasing the possibility that the United States would face a two-front war if it attacked either country. China's losses meant that it had to accept a more equal partnership with Russia than it would have prior to the war.

United States' Grand Strategy

Following the war, the United States faced an unanticipated set of challenges. Militarily, the United States enjoyed the most dominant position it had in decades in East Asia as a result of the damage it had inflicted on Chinese military capabilities. But China's aggrieved reaction to the war, and its resulting rapid increase in defense spending, underlined for U.S. decisionmakers that the war had not resolved a Sino-American struggle for hegemony in East Asia; rather, that struggle had lengthened and intensified. Although the United States could rely on clearer military advantages in the near term, analysts assessed that these would be relatively short lived in the face of the rapid Chinese defense buildup. Meanwhile, U.S. relations with allies and partners in the region—other than Japan—largely declined in the aftermath of the war. The United States was viewed as partly responsible for the unexpectedly lengthy and destructive conflict. Moreover, China's newfound insistence that states choose between economic partnership with Beijing and military cooperation with Washington led many states in the region to choose the former. The United States found its military access and partnership opportunities with the Philippines, Australia, South Korea, and Vietnam notably curtailed as these states, assessing a lower military threat from China, saw fewer benefits in the near term from U.S. military cooperation. The United States was also greatly concerned by the mutual defense pact agreed to between Moscow and Beijing, raising the possibility that any future conflict could quickly develop into a two-front war that would be harder to fight while increasing the risk of nuclear escalation.

In the face of these difficulties, the United States attempted to reduce areas of tension with China in an effort to reduce (1) the risk of conflict and (2) Chinese incentives for the new, harder line against the United States. These efforts included pressure on Japan to settle the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, or at least agree to commercial exploitation arrangements and clear warnings to Taiwan that any movement toward independence would be firmly denounced by Washington. The United States also unfroze Chinese assets in the United States and attempted to resolve commercial disputes amicably.

These efforts at détente did not appear to shift Chinese behavior, however. Wary of the risks that a rearmed and aggrieved China could pose in future years, the United States adopted a second, parallel strategy of reinvigorating its own defense investments and strongly pressuring key allies and partners to do the same. Stocks of precision munitions were badly depleted, and

priority was initially given to repurposing large numbers of upgraded existing systems rather than to research and development of new systems.

Over the longer term, the United States prioritized investments to maintain its lead relative to China in undersea warfare, which was imperiled by the new alliance between Beijing and Moscow, and to build a next-generation set of manned and unmanned aircraft and weapons that would offset Chinese mass by carrying longer-range missiles in larger numbers and would rely less on operating from large bases with long runways. Investments in offensive and defensive counterspace capabilities increased dramatically; so did investments in capabilities for cyberdefense and air base resilience.

The United States also held frank discussions with key European allies (such as the UK, France, and Germany), informing them that blunting the impact of China's military buildup would require an increasing concentration of U.S. forces in Asia. At the same time, the Sino-Russian mutual defense agreement raised the very real prospect that a conflict in Asia could quickly spread to Europe and directly involve NATO. These allies—and others, such as Poland—increased defense spending in the 2028–2030 period, but only limited gains in readiness or higher-end capabilities had been realized by 2030. Japan substantially increased its defense spending, up to roughly 2 percent of GDP by 2030, as it sought to replace assets lost in the war and offset perceived Chinese military gains.

But beyond these core allies, the United States struggled to assemble a widespread anti-PRC coalition. China's defeat had at least temporarily lessened the fears of other states in Asia that they themselves could be the next target of Chinese aggression. Chinese threats of economic retaliation for military partnership with the United States dissuaded many states from engaging even in previously routine military exercises or exchanges. U.S. warnings of rapidly growing Chinese power fell on largely deaf ears in capitals that had just observed such widespread U.S. destruction of Chinese capabilities. Washington felt increasingly concerned that the relationship with China, now hardened into antagonism, could not be repaired and that there was a real prospect of needing to fight a future conflict against a better prepared, more determined adversary—with less international support.

Geopolitical Relationships

Russia

In the aftermath of the war, building on their military cooperation during the conflict, Russia proposed a mutual defense pact with China.¹⁸⁴ The pact called on each state to come to the defense of the other in the event either was attacked by another power, but did not extend to a

¹⁸⁴ The potential for more-sustained cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is suggested by Andrew Radin, Andrew Scobell, Elina Treyger, J.D. Williams, Logan Ma, Howard J. Shatz, Sean M. Zeigler, Eugeniu Han, and Clint Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3067-A, 2021.

promise of cooperation in offensive campaigns.¹⁸⁵ This mutual defense pact was the culmination of years of gradually closer relations between the two states, but it still represented a dramatic break from the past and required Russia to overcome ongoing concerns about China. For example, Russia remained anxious regarding Chinese growth and intentions, in both the Far East and Central Asia.¹⁸⁶ Moscow also continued to worry that the formal pact could, over time, cast Russia in the role of the junior sibling to a Chinese “big brother.”¹⁸⁷

But more-acute security concerns pushed Russia to propose the pact. In particular, it recognized that China’s (at least temporary) weakness in Asia could threaten Russian interests in the Far East while leaving the United States a freer hand elsewhere in the world. This raised Russian concerns about U.S. aggression in Europe and the Middle East. Having come to Beijing’s aid during the 2027 war, Russia also believed that it had the ability to propose the pact on strictly equal terms, and it set patterns of cooperation and engagement on terms that it hoped would prove durable.

The defense pact was also accompanied by deeper defense cooperation in the postwar period. Both China and Russia chose to increase the scope and depth of technical and industrial cooperation to cooperatively develop new weapon, communication, and support systems, even in sensitive fields, such as ballistic missile defense technology,¹⁸⁸ ballistic missile early-attack warning systems,¹⁸⁹ biotechnology, and space surveillance systems. They also began developing interoperable aerial refueling systems. China believed that this cooperation would help it recover lost military strength more quickly; China also regained this strength by purchasing Russian military equipment (such as additional Su-35 fighters and S-400 air defense systems) and by

¹⁸⁵ Notably, the pact explicitly excluded any promise of Russian support for a PRC attack on Taiwan or Chinese support for a Russian attack on states in Europe.

¹⁸⁶ Central Asia is expected to remain a particular source of tension in the Russo-Chinese strategic partnership through the 2020s, attendant to Beijing’s growing investments and rising influence in erstwhile Soviet space, coupled with a lack of coordination between Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union concept and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Susan A. Thornton, *China in Central Asia: Is China Winning the “New Great Game”?* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, June 2020; Paul Goble, “Russian Military Seeking to Counter Growing Chinese Role in Central Asia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 88, June 18, 2020; Vasily Kashin, Ma Bin, Yuki Tatsumi, and Zhang Jian, *Sino-Russian Relations: Perspectives from Russia, China, and Japan*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 79, May 2019).

¹⁸⁷ Russia’s previous refusal to envision itself in a subordinate role in any alliance is reflected in its official discourse regarding relations with China. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, for example, has emphasized that Russia is not China’s “little brother,” and that Russia supported “relations between sovereign states that are not subjected to dictatorship on any side.” See “Lavrov: It Is Wrong to Call China Russia’s ‘Big Brother,’” *News.ru*, September 5, 2019.

¹⁸⁸ Such cooperation already existed but was strengthened following the conflict (Huang Panyue, “China Russia Missile Defense Cooperation Needed,” *Global Times*, October 15, 2019).

¹⁸⁹ Radin et al., 2021, p. 116.

exploring the acquisition of Su-57s and anti-submarine warfare systems.¹⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Russia believed that closer defense cooperation would create an opportunity to take advantage of China's much greater levels of investment in science and technology.¹⁹¹

China and Russia also agreed to undertake larger and more-elaborate military exercises and joint operations. These were intended not only to signal the solidity of the new defense pact and to prepare for theater-level cooperation in future wars, the way they had in prewar exercises, but also to boost operational-level interoperability and test new concepts of operation developed on the basis of combat experience against the United States. Beijing saw these exercises as a means of deterring the United States and its allies in a period of weakness; Russia believed that the exercises demonstrated Russia's own status as a military great power. Exercises consisted of joint maritime coastal defense operations off major Chinese and Russian ports, aerospace defense operations, naval maneuvers, network warfare training, and aerial patrols in the Sea of Japan and East China Sea.¹⁹² Western analysts concluded that the exercises, which appeared to emphasize training for a future war against the United States in the Western Pacific, likely also resulted in a convergence in some key Russian and Chinese doctrinal concepts.¹⁹³ This convergence was amplified by an expansion in bilateral military exchanges and military education.

Russia's relations with, and influence over, other states in the aftermath of the war were generally enhanced. In both its domestic communications and in broader global strategic messaging campaigns, Russia played up its role as the decisive actor in bringing a great Asian conflict to a halt. Russia also used the new mutual defense pact with China as a clear indication of its global great power status. Moscow sought to burnish this image and parlay it into greater economic opportunities, particularly in terms of arms sales. Russia's relations with Europe suffered, however. Although Russia's entry into the war had not meant the conflict's expansion into Europe, the conclusion of the Russian pact with China was still greeted with concern in

¹⁹⁰ Russia has proven increasingly eager to use the Chinese market to support its own aircraft industry, and reports suggest that it is less worried about the risk of Chinese reverse-engineering of its advanced technologies (Franz-Stefan Gady, "Russia Offers China Another Batch of Su-35 Fighter Jets," *The Diplomat*, June 27, 2019b; Liu Xuanzun, "China to Be Offered Russia's 'Best Warplane' Su-57," *Global Times*, March 31, 2019).

¹⁹¹ Sino-Russian cooperation in technology development is analyzed in Samuel Bendett and Elsa Kania, "The Resilience of Sino-Russian High-Tech Cooperation," *War on the Rocks*, August 12, 2020.

¹⁹² Similar joint operations and exercises have been conducted in the past, but they increase in frequency and incorporate new capabilities—much like the Tsentr-2019 exercise (which focused on network-enabled operations and incorporated unmanned aerial vehicles [UAVs] to enhance combat capabilities) and the Joint-Sea series (which has tested shipboard missile defense systems). For more detail, see "Center2019 Military Exercises Held in Russia," Xinhua, September 9, 2019; Roger McDermott, "Russia Tests Network-Centric Warfare in Tsentr-2019," *Real Clear Defense* September 14, 2020e; and Franz-Stefan Gady, "China, Russia Conduct First Ever Joint Strategic Bomber Patrol Flights in Indo-Pacific Region," *The Diplomat*, July 23, 2019a.

¹⁹³ For a discussion of the different drivers of Russian influence on Chinese military thinking, especially in the nuclear field, see Roger McDermott, "Russia's Impact on Nuclear Policy in China: Cooperative Trends and Depth of Influence," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2020a.

NATO and the EU. Several of these states increased defense spending and increasingly explored alternatives to a reliance on Russian energy.

U.S. Allies and Partners

In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, most U.S. allies and partners viewed China as weaker with diminished military capabilities and influence in the region, although U.S. actions to widen the conflict were viewed as overly aggressive and risky. Against this backdrop, the Chinese decision to use its economic leverage to reduce the presence of U.S. military forces in the region left many U.S. allies and partners with uncomfortable decisions. States had historically attempted to juggle close security relationships with the United States with close economic relationships with China. Following the war, China increasingly forced states to choose. In 2029, China singled out the Philippines for a comprehensive economic boycott until Manila agreed to revoke its Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, branding U.S. forces in the region as an unacceptable threat to Chinese security. Perceiving a reduced risk of Chinese aggression in the near term (particularly given Chinese promises to deemphasize disputes in the South China Sea for the foreseeable future and therefore a reduced need for a U.S. military presence), Manila complied. Throughout 2029 and 2030, China pressured other states in the region using similar tactics, with mixed results. Both Australia and South Korea pointedly refused to evict U.S. forces from their territory—although both resisted U.S. efforts to further expand military cooperation, and highly visible exercises were put on hold.¹⁹⁴ Other states—notably Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia—scaled back or eliminated their security cooperation activities with the United States.¹⁹⁵ Some of these states, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, raised the issue of Chinese coercion within ASEAN, but the organization failed to come to any consensus because of differing, pro-Beijing views of such members as Laos and Cambodia. No collective action was taken, leaving states to settle their differences with China on a bilateral basis. Cambodia accelerated plans to provide China with increased military access, including naval facilities at Sihanoukville.

Although U.S. relative power had increased in the region, the result was a reduction in access and presence outside Japan and, to a lesser extent, Australia. Prior to the conflict, Australia had committed to increasing its long-range naval and deterrence capabilities, and it saw China's defeat as an opportunity to continue increasing its cooperative security relationships with other

¹⁹⁴ South Korea is wary of China's military power but does view China's cooperation as a factor in deterring Pyongyang (Harold et al., 2019).

¹⁹⁵ Although these countries perceived a reduced threat from China in the near term, the potential remained over the longer term for a return to closer military cooperation with the United States. For an example of a Southeast Asian country's maritime threat assessment and implications for maritime capabilities (including the need to bolster ISR), see Morris and Paoli, 2018.

countries in the region, such as Japan, Singapore, and Indonesia.¹⁹⁶ Australia also continued to purchase U.S. capabilities and equipment to assist with long-range targeting and deterrence.¹⁹⁷

In Japan, meanwhile, despite heavy losses and casualties, the success of the United States and Japan in reasserting control of the islands was viewed as a victory by the Japanese public and strengthened public support for the U.S.-Japan security alliance. With greater public support, Japanese leadership called for a strengthening of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. Furthermore, observations of China's rising nationalist, anti-Japanese sentiment following the war led to anti-PRC demonstrations and sentiment in Japan, giving the Japanese government wide latitude to pursue more-aggressive measures. China's actions and the fact that Beijing had not renounced its territorial claims over the islands reinforced the concern that conflict might occur again. Some of Japan's political elite, therefore, pressed for harsher policy in dealing with China, including retaliatory sanctions in response to destruction of Japanese property in mainland demonstrations and riots. However, under pressure from Washington and concerned about the cost of further conflict, Japanese leaders instead muted their disapproval and pursued CBMs and stronger crisis management mechanisms, although Chinese reactions to these overtures were tepid. Japan did increase its defense budget and began the process of rebuilding and strengthening its military, particularly in the areas of missile defense, naval capabilities, and ISR.¹⁹⁸ Japan also sought to upgrade regional security arrangements with partners that assisted in the conflict, such as South Korea, Singapore, and Australia. This move was supported by a majority of Japanese citizens, in light of increased Chinese aggression and the need to bolster Japan's defenses. Tokyo, however, had to manage postwar protests from a smaller but still vocal pacifist movement that proved particularly fractious on Okinawa, where prefectural leaders and local pacifists pressured for withdrawal of U.S. forces from the island.

Risk of Conflict Recurrence

The risk of immediate conflict recurrence between China and the United States or Japan was low because of China's diminished military capabilities following the conflict. China knew it was in no position to take aggressive actions, and the United States was initially invested in a strategy of outreach and placation of China. However, as the Chinese rearmament program began to bear fruit after 2030 and reduce the perceived military gap between the United States and China, the risk of conflict recurrence was widely assessed to have increased. The prewar

¹⁹⁶ Australia and Singapore have recently deepened defense ties (Prashanth Parameswaran, "Australia-Singapore Defense Relations in the Spotlight with New Military Training Agreement," *The Diplomat*, March 23, 2020; "Australia and Indonesia Complete Maritime Training Exercise Cassowary," *Naval Technology*, September 26, 2019).

¹⁹⁷ For example, the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency announced in February 2020 that Australia plans to purchase up to 200 U.S. LRASMs for its F-18 aircraft, a development that could contribute to the broader approach of improving the ability of allies and partners to deter or respond to Chinese coercion. For details, see U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Australia," Washington, D.C., December 2, 2019.

¹⁹⁸ For an overview of Japan's future defense spending priorities, see Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2020.

sources of tension in the U.S.-China relationship persisted, including maritime disputes with U.S. allies or partners and the unresolved status of Taiwan. To these were added a pronounced Chinese popular and elite antipathy toward the United States and its aggressive destruction of PLA capabilities in the prior conflict. In turn, this sharpened PRC motivations to oppose the U.S. military presence in Asia, leading to additional sources of tension with both the United States and U.S. allies and partners. Although the possibilities for a long-term rapprochement between Beijing and Washington in Asia had always been tenuous, the 2027 war appeared to have foreclosed them, and both states assessed that a repeat conflict was highly likely in the years to come.

International Order

On the surface, major pillars of the international order were not dramatically altered by the 2027 war. China's loss, and its at least temporary loss of influence and resources for international outreach, undermined its efforts to build and fund parallel international institutions or to use its clout to push for changes in existing ones. Key international organizations, such as the UN and the WTO, continued to be the focus of international cooperation efforts. Chinese anger at the United States and Japan following the war did spill over into the functioning of these institutions, however. China reflexively vetoed U.S.-sponsored initiatives in the UN Security Council, a contrast with its historical reluctance to exercise this prerogative.¹⁹⁹ The WTO was asked increasingly often to adjudicate Chinese efforts to restrict trade as a lever to pressure states to limit military cooperation with the United States, while China ignored any contrary rulings. Other states became increasingly frustrated by the escalation of Washington-Beijing tensions that appeared to be hamstringing key aspects of the international system, despite initial U.S. efforts at rapprochement.

Key international norms, including those involving nuclear use or proliferation, were less affected by the war. The implications of the conflict for international norms against conquest and interstate aggression were less clear. The 2027 war had begun as a gray-zone conflict rather than an open attempt at conquest by Chinese military forces, and China argued in its messaging that it had not violated these norms. States did begin to view the gray-zone activities themselves differently after the war, which had highlighted the potential risks of such activities. Russia and China, previously among the most-aggressive states in these areas, approached gray-zone activities more cautiously. The exception to this trend was activities in the cyber or information realms, which were still assessed to be at lower risk of escalation and more cost-effective in an environment in which Chinese security resources were stretched thin.

¹⁹⁹ For a discussion of veto patterns in UN Security Council voting, see Security Council Report, "The Veto," webpage, March 7, 2020.

Risks of Conflict Between Other Great Powers

The risk of conflict between other great powers was generally reduced in the immediate aftermath of the war. The withdrawal of most U.S. air and naval capabilities from Europe led to a reduction in Russian threat perceptions and in the risk of miscalculation or misperception between the United States and Russia in that region. NATO more broadly remained highly concerned with Russia, particularly in light of the Russian mutual defense pact with China. However, the clear stipulations that the pact would not apply to any aggressive Russian move against NATO, the maintenance of U.S. Article V commitments, and increases in defense spending among other NATO allies mitigated these concerns. Other states in the region—including Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia—became increasingly concerned that they might be targets for Russian aggression, but the United States signaled that it did not intend to come to their aid in a conflict with Moscow.

The risk of conflict between China and India also appeared to decline after the war. China's large-scale military losses and preoccupation with rearming to combat the perceived threat from the United States in East Asia left it with little interest in escalating tensions with India over the contested border. India, for its part, happily accepted this reduction in tensions and focused its energy on expanding its economic and diplomatic influence elsewhere in Asia, taking advantage of China's distraction with the task of rearmament. The risk of conflict between China and Russia, meanwhile, appeared to have evaporated with the signing of the mutual defense pact, and the two states cooperated more closely on defense matters than they had in decades.

Implications for the Joint Force in This Postwar Setting

The extensive destruction of Chinese military assets during the conflict eased pressure on the U.S. joint force in the Indo-Pacific in the aftermath of the war. However, developments in the post-conflict period heightened the challenges for which U.S. forces would need to prepare over the longer term. U.S. assessments indicated that for the 2027–2030 period, the United States would likely be able to defeat any PRC attempt to invade Taiwan or a return engagement over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, easing pressures on readiness and forward posturing requirements. The initial focus of the U.S. Department of Defense after 2027 was on replacing the substantial losses to U.S. equipment during the war, which required increases to defense budgets.

However, as the postwar period progressed, several substantial, additional challenges emerged. U.S. military access in the Indo-Pacific became increasingly restricted in the face of the concerted PRC effort to force states to choose between U.S. military cooperation and PRC economic access. The United States lost access to bases in the Philippines entirely, and access throughout Southeast Asia became increasingly limited, although remaining robust in Japan and Australia. At the same time, the immense scope of Chinese military rebuilding efforts highlighted the long-term risks to the regional balance of power and forced a broader U.S. reconsideration of military spending priorities. The United States increased investments to

maintain its lead over China in undersea warfare and in manned and unmanned aircraft that would rely less on operating from large bases with long runways. At the same time, however, the formalized China-Russia defensive pact heightened concerns among NATO allies regarding European security, forcing politically difficult choices regarding how to prioritize investments and posture across the two theaters. Although the joint force assessed that it retained a greater edge in the Indo-Pacific in 2030 than it had in 2027, longer-term projections highlighted much greater concerns regarding the relative capabilities in and potential outcomes of key potential conflict scenarios in the region.

4. Unexpected War over Taiwan Ends in a Frozen Conflict

NOTE: This report was finalized in January 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has not been subsequently updated.

In 2025, political developments in Taiwan caught both China and the United States off guard, leading to a reactive use of force by China and a U.S. military intervention to defend Taiwan. The conflict was ultimately indecisive and ended in a stalemate after several months. China seized Taiwan's offshore islands but could not force Taiwan's capitulation or establish a foothold on Taiwan. This scenario explores different dynamics than those found in the Taiwan scenario in Chapter 2. That first scenario considered an invasion of Taiwan at a time of China's choosing; this scenario explores the possibility of China being caught off-guard and being unable to immediately launch a full-scale invasion. The result is a frozen conflict across the Taiwan Strait, with the U.S.-China relationship redefined by a long-term U.S. presence on Taiwan and an explicit U.S. commitment to Taiwan's defense.

Conflict Narrative

This section describes the conflict scenario chronologically. In the next section, we discuss key aspects of changes in political alignments in more detail.

War Initiation and Stakes

At the beginning of 2025, China and the United States continued to view Taiwan as a source of tension in their relationship. China had denounced U.S. arms sales as “emboldening Taiwan separatists,” but neither side expected a war in the immediate future. Against this backdrop, however, Taiwan's president unexpectedly announced plans to hold a referendum that China viewed as a step toward independence. Critics argued that this move risked a cross-strait conflict, but the president ignored the warnings and pressed ahead.²⁰⁰

At the same time, discussions emerged within Taiwan's Legislative Yuan to renew a push for a new Taiwan Constitution.²⁰¹ Although similar efforts had failed in the past, Beijing worried that independence activists would be more successful this time. Public opinion had shifted in

²⁰⁰ This set of developments draws loosely from the period of heightened tension in cross-strait relations that began in late 2003, when China suggested that then-President Chen Shui-Bian's plans to hold a referendum could result in a conflict and President George W. Bush warned Taiwan to avoid actions that could be seen as undermining the status quo (Joseph Kahn, “Chinese Officers Warn That Taiwan Referendum Could Lead to War,” *New York Times*, 2003; Dana Miliband and Glenn Kessler, “President Warns Taiwan on Independence Efforts,” *Washington Post*, 2003).

²⁰¹ For example, see “New Constitution Plan Outlined,” *Taipei Times*, April 27, 2020.

favor of a separate Taiwanese identity and against closer ties with the mainland in the preceding years,²⁰² a shift that appeared to have resulted from a combination of factors, such as generational change, China's pressure campaign against the island, and Beijing's repression in Hong Kong.

Although it was not fully prepared for the conflict militarily, China decided it must quickly intervene to change Taiwan's political direction before the island took political steps that would be difficult or impossible for Beijing to reverse; China also believed that a nonmilitary strategy would undercut the CCP's domestic legitimacy and undermine the country's vital interests.²⁰³ Although the CCP felt a military response was necessary, it did not believe that the PLA was prepared to execute an invasion of Taiwan. China did not have sufficient amphibious lift and other critical capabilities, and the PLA had not been mobilized for war—all of which created a high risk of failure, especially if the United States were to intervene.²⁰⁴ The CCP assessed that a failed invasion would lead to greater moves toward Taiwan's independence, undercut CCP legitimacy, and ultimately be domestically destabilizing.

The CMC assessed that it would be less risky to impose costs on Taiwan than to attempt an immediate invasion. China's objective was to compel Taiwan to abandon the referendum and constitutional reform and to accept a "One China" framework for cross-strait dialogue. The CCP believed that strikes, a blockade, and an information campaign would drive Taiwan to accept Beijing's political terms before the United States could launch a full-scale intervention.

The campaign plans called for initial massive, joint fire strike operations against Taiwan military and leadership targets. This was to be followed by establishment of a comprehensive blockade, accompanied by the suppression or seizure of some outer islands (especially the Penghus) by PLA amphibious, airborne, airmobile, and SOFs to support blockade sustainment and further pressure Taiwan to capitulate.²⁰⁵ While these operations unfolded, the CMC intended

²⁰² For example, see NCCU Election Study Center, "Trends of Core Political Attitudes," webpage, July 3, 2020.

²⁰³ Taiwanese independence could be seen to threaten all three of China's core interests (preserving China's basic system and national security, national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the continued stable development of China's economy and society) and the broader strategic objective of China's national rejuvenation. For a discussion of how China defines its interests, see Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 34, February 22, 2011.

²⁰⁴ Previous studies have indicated that China may not possess the amphibious lift capabilities necessary to conduct an outright invasion in 2025 (Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen A. Gunness, Scott Warren Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-893-USCC, 2015; Minnie Chan, "'Too Costly': Chinese Military Strategist Warns Now Is Not the Time to Take Back Taiwan by Force," *South China Morning Post*, May 4, 2020).

²⁰⁵ This scenario explores the possibility that China has a low assessment of Taiwan's willingness to fight. Such a low assessment could arise, for example, if China believed its ability to enforce a blockade would outlast Taiwan's reserves of critical materials. For a discussion of how the PRC would conduct such a preemptive strike to complicate Taiwan's ability to send reinforcements, see Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Can China Conquer Taiwan?* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, September 2000. For an acknowledgment that the ROC should prepare for this type of

to position amphibious, airmobile, and airborne forces to conduct an invasion, in case Taiwan did not capitulate in a timely fashion and senior CCP leadership decided to undertake the risk of an invasion.

Chinese Attack on Taiwan and Blockade Initiation

As soon as the CMC made the decision to conduct the campaign, it began national defense mobilization, including covert mining operations and deployment of submarines to form distant picket lines in support of impending blockade operations.²⁰⁶ Beijing issued an ultimatum demanding that Taiwan renounce plans to seek independence within five days and enter immediate reunification talks on the basis of a “One Country, Two Systems” formula. China then declared a 100-km air and maritime exclusion zone around Taiwan and established an additional 100-km “warning zone.” At the same time, the CMC ordered mobilization of forces for an amphibious invasion of Taiwan both to increase its coercive leverage and to keep open its options for how to fight the conflict.

In response, Taiwan began mobilizing its armed forces and deployed mobile air defenses, coastal defense missile launchers, and other units from garrison.²⁰⁷ For survivability against an expected Chinese attack, most vessels in the ROC Navy (ROCN) were put to sea and ROC Air Force (ROCAF) fighters moved to mountainside hangars.²⁰⁸ The U.S. State Department advised all U.S. citizens in China and Taiwan to leave. Japan protested the illegality of the exclusion zone and the “warning zone,” which also covered its own Yonaguni and Taketomi islands, then mobilized JSDF assets.

PLAN and PLAAF units moved as surface action groups into positions to enforce exclusion zones surrounding Taiwan. The PRC announced that any traffic in the warning zone must immediately return home or go to a neutral port or airfield, and that any vessel in an exclusion zone had 12 hours to vacate or be subject to attack by Chinese military forces. Mines covertly laid by PLA forces around Taiwan’s main ports and in chokepoints surrounding the exclusion zones were activated after this deadline passed.

Forty-eight hours after the blockade announcement, strikes against Taiwan by Chinese missile and air forces began. The first waves of attacks struck fixed military facilities, such as air

capitulation in a ROC-PRC war, see Benjamin Fan, “Taiwan’s Dilemma: Why a Blockade Is Likelier Than an Invasion,” *Taiwan Sentinel*, April 2017.

²⁰⁶ The PLA would be expected to use a substantial number of mines in a future conflict involving Taiwan. For example, see Heginbotham et al., 2015; Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and William S. Murray, *Chinese Mine Warfare: A PLA Navy “Assassin’s Mace” Capability*, Newport, R.I.: U.S. Naval War College, 2009.

²⁰⁷ A useful open-source analysis of Taiwan’s military strategy is David An, *Reconstructing Taiwan’s Military Strategy: Achieving Forward Defense Through Multi-Domain Deterrence*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 69, February 2018.

²⁰⁸ Aspects of Taiwan’s air base hardening and defenses, such as its mountain tunnel hanger facilities, are described in Ian Easton, *Able Archers: Taiwan Defense Strategy in an Age of Precision Strike*, Arlington, Va.: Project 2049 Institute, September 2014.

bases. Much of the ROCAF was immobilized by attacks that destroyed runways or closed mountainside hangar entrances, and all ROCN vessels not already at sea were sunk or disabled.²⁰⁹ The attacks then moved to C2 nodes and other military targets, with PLAAF remotely piloted aircraft appearing over the island in large numbers to help cue attacks against Taiwan's mobile SAMs. On Jinmen and Matsu, massive PLA Army long-range rocket launchers and conventional artillery barrages neutralized much of Taiwan's defensive capability and fully degraded its ability to interfere with the PLA's maritime operations. The PLA considered these strikes on the outlying islands as necessary preliminary steps in its blockade of Taiwan.²¹⁰ With Taiwan air and maritime forces paralyzed, PLA amphibious, airmobile, and SOF task forces assaulted and occupied the Penghus.

Once China's assault began, Taiwan struck mainland military targets, such as Chinese ports and air bases, using its limited number of cruise missiles. Although the effects on China's operations would be limited, Taiwan's president viewed the strikes as an important means of signaling Taipei's resolve to its public, China, and the United States.

United States and Japan Join Conflict to Defend Taiwan

China had hoped to deter, or at least delay, a U.S. military intervention and thus had not struck U.S. forces or bases in the region. But within days of China attacking Taiwan, the United States initiated strikes against PRC maritime targets. The U.S. president gave a prime-time address providing the public U.S. rationale for entering the war: China has violated its prior promises to pursue reunification peacefully, and it could not be allowed to succeed in its attempted conquest of a free, democratic U.S. partner. In much the same way that the United States opposed Iraq's conquest of Kuwait in 1991, the United States would not allow China to rewrite the rules of the international order to legitimize naked, armed conquest.

U.S. war aims were to prevent China from invading and occupying Taiwan or even coercing Taiwan to meet PRC demands by force. The United States viewed preserving Taiwan's

²⁰⁹ Extant PLA concepts and capabilities for strikes on enemy air bases, and the threat those concepts and capabilities pose to Taiwanese defenses, are analyzed in Oriana Skylar Mastro and Ian Easton, *Risk and Resiliency: China's Emerging Air Base Strike Threat*, Arlington, Va.: Project 2049 Institute, November 8, 2017; and Michael J. Lostumbo, David R. Frelinger, James Williams, and Barry Wilson, *Air Defense Options for Taiwan: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Operational Benefits*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1051-OSD, 2016. Earlier RAND assessments of PLA attacks on runways and hardened aircraft shelters suggest the vulnerability of Taiwanese air bases to PLA ballistic and cruise missile strikes; see Heginbotham et al., 2015.

²¹⁰ The PLA is not shy about its preparations to attack these islands, and it even uses threats to do so for political purposes. Taiwan also frequently conducts its largest annual military drill—the Han Kuang exercise—in the offshore islands, indicating its judgment regarding the likelihood of being attacked by the PLA in the event of a future armed conflict (Keoni Everington, “Leaked Map Shows China Plans to Invade S. Taiwan After Taking Kinmen, Penghu,” *Taiwan News*, January 20, 2020).

On China's development and deployment of counterspace capabilities, see Daniel R. Coats, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee on March 6, 2018, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2018; and Harrison et al., 2020.

autonomy and democracy as important to preserving the credibility of its commitments to regional allies and partners and preventing China from gaining a strategic position on Taiwan that would allow it to project power against its neighbors or into the maritime commons. The United States entered the conflict unsure about whether China would launch a large-scale amphibious invasion of Taiwan but aware that China was making preparations to do so.

U.S. air and naval assets already in the Western Pacific began by attacking Chinese surface action groups, submarines, and aircraft enforcing the blockade zones. They inflicted heavy damage on Chinese maritime assets; U.S. attack submarines and unmanned underwater vehicles proved particularly lethal. Additional ships and air squadrons were rushed to the theater. The United States also began taking steps to impose a distant blockade against China.

As soon as U.S. air operations launched from U.S. bases in Japan targeted PLA blockade forces, China attacked those bases. Japanese forces, which were hurriedly mobilizing, entered the conflict on the side of Taiwan and the United States, conducting strikes on Chinese naval forces enforcing the blockade of Taiwan but refraining from strikes on targets inside mainland China. Japanese activities consisted of anti-submarine warfare and anti-surface warfare operations against Chinese blockade forces and support operations to resupply Taiwan. China also began striking U.S. bases and forces throughout the region, including the U.S. territory of Guam.

Meanwhile, the United States also began putting personnel in Taiwan. The first group of SOFs and a small number of joint liaison personnel (numbering approximately 200 in total) deployed to Taiwan by air as soon as China announced the blockade to coordinate the activities of Taiwan's forces and INDOPACOM's component commands. During the second week of the conflict, a few hundred U.S. SOF personnel and a Marine Corps brigade deployed to Taiwan.

Immediately on U.S. entry into the conflict, China also attacked U.S. space systems in an attempt to gain information superiority. China conducted nonkinetic attacks on U.S. satellites and kinetic attacks on terrestrial control facilities.²¹¹ Later, as U.S. operations increased in intensity and effectiveness, China employed space-based hunter-killer satellites against U.S. assets in LEO, which generated less debris than DA-ASAT capabilities. Finally, China conducted offensive cyberoperations against military and civilian targets throughout the region, including against Taiwan, Japan, and the United States (Guam, Hawaii, and the mainland). These attacks modestly degraded some C2 and intelligence capabilities and reduced the speed with which the United States was able to mobilize additional forces to deploy into the theater.

China's use of force against Taiwan provoked diplomatic condemnation, but few countries were willing to militarily support Taiwan aside from the United States and Japan. Motivated by alliance obligations to the United States and by vociferous calls from the Australian public for a more decisive stance in support of democracy, Australia allowed U.S. forces to operate from its territory. However, Australian forces did not participate directly in the war because of concerns

²¹¹ Engstrom, 2018.

about Chinese retaliation.²¹² The South Korean government was hesitant to provide direct support to U.S. operations but did provide intelligence and logistics planning support to U.S. forces. The Philippines initially provided limited access for ISR and combat operations against the Chinese blockade forces. China's strikes on Philippine military facilities caused Manila to change course roughly one month into the conflict and demand that U.S. forces leave the Philippines.²¹³ ASEAN failed to come to any consensus on the conflict because of the general trend toward neutrality among many of its members and the pro-Beijing views of such members as Laos and Cambodia. The EU implemented sanctions on China in support of the U.S. blockade, but stayed out of the conflict militarily.²¹⁴

U.S. Expanded Strikes in Response to Wide-Ranging Chinese Attacks on U.S. Forces

In response to China's attacks on U.S. bases in the Western Pacific, the United States conducted air strikes and cruise missile attacks against military targets on the Chinese mainland. In an attempt to reduce the risk of escalation, the United States focused its attacks on military targets directly related to the blockade, island seizure operations, and the forces that appeared to be preparing for an invasion of Taiwan. The United States avoided some targets that it worried could increase the possibility of Chinese nuclear use, such as PLARF nuclear missile brigades, C2 systems, and leadership facilities in and around Beijing. The United States also attacked Chinese space systems to diminish China's ability to locate and target U.S. forces operating in the region. Like China, the United States used capabilities that allowed it to do so without generating large amounts of debris.²¹⁵

In an attempt to dissuade China from further cyberattacks, the United States launched what it believed to be proportional cyberattacks on Chinese targets. This involved attacks intended to disrupt China's maritime C2 and interfere with its ISR and long-range strike systems. However, China viewed these as highly escalatory and began targeting a wider variety of U.S. critical infrastructure, producing sporadic disruptions to both banking and communications systems. The

²¹² Australia has been involved in partnerships with countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, to bolster democracy. The Australian government is also increasingly concerned about China's disinformation campaigns and interference in Southeast Asian politics, through which China seeks to influence democratic societies. Jonathan Stromseth and Hunter Marston, *Democracy at a Crossroads in Southeast Asia: Great Power Rivalry Meets Domestic Governance*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2019.

²¹³ The role of the Philippines changes in this scenario rather than remaining constant the way it does in the Taiwan scenario described in Chapter 2. We explore this possibility for the sake of diversity.

²¹⁴ Although the EU recognizes the "One China" policy, which acknowledges the PRC government as the sole legal government of China, the EU supports the peaceful negotiation and resolution of differences between Taiwan and mainland China and rejects the use or threat of force against Taiwan. For more on this, see European Parliament, "Taiwan's Political Survival in a Challenging Geopolitical Context," briefing, March 2019.

²¹⁵ For a discussion of U.S. space capabilities that minimize the creation of orbital debris, see U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018.

United States, in turn, launched its own offensive cyberoperations against Chinese communications and financial systems.

The United States chipped away at China's blockade of Taiwan and got critical supplies into Taiwan by air and, eventually, by sea, but shortages continued on the island. Although many countries called for an end to China's blockade, no country except Japan assisted the United States in counterblockade operations. At the same time, no countries other than Russia proved willing to directly challenge the U.S. distant blockade on China, and maritime trade with the PRC also fell dramatically.

Change in China's Strategy

When PLA fire strike and blockade operations failed by day 90 to bring about Taiwan's capitulation, CCP leaders came to a decision point. With PLAN losses mounting and USAF F-22 and F-35 fighter sweeps attriting PLAAF and PLA Naval Air Force aircraft, Beijing assessed that the blockade was not sustainable. Therefore, China could either launch an invasion and risk a larger, highly visible defeat (and continue to bear the economic costs of the U.S. distant blockade in the meantime) or find a way of declaring this a successful battle in the long war for reunification and regroup to determine its strategy for that longer conflict. Chinese leaders took the domestic temperature and decided that the CCP could survive the latter but might not survive the former if the invasion failed. The CMC decided to find a conflict offramp to cease hostilities.

In search of a means of plausibly "declaring victory" to the Chinese people while quickly ending the war, the CMC ordered PLA amphibious forces and SOFs to seize the Jinmen and Matsu islands, which had been under a state of siege since the early hours of the conflict. Taiwanese resistance was overcome relatively easily compared with the fighting on the Penghus. Immediately afterward, Beijing announced that it had successfully dissuaded Taiwan from seeking independence, safeguarded China's national dignity, and made important strides toward restoring China's reunification and was therefore willing to suspend offensive operations.

Within hours of China's announcement, an uneasy and unofficial truce settled over the Taiwan Strait. China was left in possession of islands that provided it with a symbolic victory and staging ground for future operations. Taiwan preserved its de facto independence but refrained from an official declaration of independence. U.S. ground forces remained on Taiwan, and the United States was now more clearly and intensely committed to the defense of Taiwan than it had been at any time since it established diplomatic relations with the PRC.

Key Issues in the Conflict Period

This section discusses some key aspects about the war in greater detail.

U.S. and Chinese Diplomatic and Economic Strategies

U.S. diplomacy during the war focused on two main issues: (1) securing access and support for U.S. military operations from allies and partners in the region, along with diplomatic support from other allies in Europe; and (2) enlisting support for, or at least acquiescence to, a wide-ranging U.S. blockade of trade with China. Efforts to secure military access and direct military support was limited, as already discussed. U.S. economic leverage over China proved more potent, however. Although many other countries would have preferred not to take sides in the conflict, in the face of a U.S. Navy blockade and wide-ranging U.S. diplomatic efforts to portray providing war materiel to the PRC as a potential reason for China to retaliate, most countries' leaderships placed pressure on their domestic companies to not attempt to challenge the U.S. distant blockade. Chinese imports of energy, industrial goods, and other largely seaborne items were reduced dramatically, forcing China to rely on overland routes from Russia and Central Asia and to tap domestic reserves and institute rationing.

China's diplomatic and economic strategies centered on isolating Taiwan from potential sources of international support other than the United States and on coercing U.S. regional allies and partners to stay out of the conflict or at least limit the support they were willing to provide to the United States. Beijing calculated that the prospect of future Chinese economic punishment would be enough to deter many countries in the region from becoming involved in the conflict with Taiwan. However, China lacked the levers to isolate or punish the United States in similar economic ways or to fundamentally undermine the U.S. distant blockade. Instead, China drew on its close relationship with Russia to try to secure alternative supply routes that could offset the damage to its own economy and prolong its ability to conduct the war.

Length, Intensity, Scope, and Scale of Damage

The war was a high-intensity conflict that lasted approximately three months. It also expanded in geographic scope as it unfolded. China and the United States suffered heavy losses in the war. Large portions of China's navy (approximately 40 percent of the modern surface combatant force and some 20 submarines) and numerous air and air defense assets were destroyed (including hundreds of fourth- and fifth-generation fighters, primarily during their efforts to enforce the blockade against Taiwan and engage the United States further from the mainland. The PLARF's short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missile inventory and long-range ground-launched cruise missile inventory were severely depleted, and the defense industrial capacity to regenerate missiles was constrained because of supply disruptions from the U.S. blockade. The United States lost more than a dozen surface combatants, several submarines, and hundreds of aircraft—the majority of the latter on the ground during missile attacks on U.S. bases, which suffered heavy damage throughout the region. Although U.S. military casualties were lighter than China's and far more so than Taiwan's, U.S. counts totaled approximately 2,500 killed or missing. Taiwan lost most of its air and naval capabilities. Although its ground

and reserve forces were less affected, the ROCN and ROCAF were essentially rendered combat ineffective by the end of the first week of the conflict.

Civilian casualties in mainland China, on Taiwan, and other affected countries remained limited; all parties had clear incentives to avoid unnecessary damage in order to court world opinion and avoid political and diplomatic blowback. Precision munitions also enabled relatively accurate strikes, particularly early in the conflict when such munitions were more plentiful, although targeting mistakes were still made on all sides. Nevertheless, the civilian death toll was significant: more than a thousand each in mainland China and Japan, and more than ten times as many on Taiwan. Hundreds of U.S. noncombatants were killed across the theater in the course of Chinese strikes on Taiwan and in the various base attacks.

Role of Airpower During the Conflict

The role of airpower was extensive. China employed air and ballistic and cruise missile strikes against targets in Taiwan, Japan, Guam, and (initially) the Philippines. The initial focus was on short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) strikes against Taiwan C2 facilities, radar installations, key air defenses, and airfields. These were followed by extensive fighter-bomber sorties to further degrade and destroy Taiwan C2, ISR, and air defense capabilities. Chinese strike operations against targets in Japan followed a similar pattern, with long-range cruise missiles augmenting ballistic missile strikes to open the door for follow-on bomber sorties; U.S. logistics facilities, airfields, and air defense assets were defined as the primary targets. PLAAF fighters conducted surge operations to establish air superiority in portions of the exclusion zone in support of specific blockade operations; operations also took place over air blockade zones to the north, south, and east of Taiwan. As the conflict escalated, China used PLARF intermediate-range ballistic missiles and PLAAF bombers armed with cruise missiles to attack targets in the Marianas.

The U.S.-led campaign to defeat the Chinese blockade of Taiwan relied on a combination of seapower and airpower. The key aerial assets for this part of the effort were ISR platforms; fighters to contest control of the air over and around Taiwan; and bombers, fighters, and unmanned aircraft systems with countersea capabilities to threaten and attack PLAN ships and submarines. Because of the Chinese ability to bombard Taiwan with rockets and missiles, all of these operations had to be conducted from relatively distant bases, giving the PLAAF a significant geographic advantage in the contest. However, these bases were also under threat—and, not infrequently, attack—from Chinese ballistic and cruise missiles.

The other key roles of U.S. airpower in this scenario were more latent because China did not ultimately invade the island, but airlift was essential for inserting U.S. forces in Taiwan in the face of the exclusion zone and sustaining them once they were deployed. Had the PLA conducted an assault, aerial firepower would have been in intense demand to support and protect the U.S. SOFs and marines ashore. After the conflict, the need to provide these capabilities persisted, as did the presence of U.S. ground forces. Analysts frequently cautioned that Taiwan

was, in many respects, inherently indefensible against a concerted Chinese attack—not unlike the Baltic states facing the possibility of Russian aggression. But the United States sustained its commitment and expected the USAF and other U.S. armed services to be prepared for a future contingency to defend Taiwan.

Narrative of Post-Conflict Developments

In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, all sides hoped to avoid another war and even took steps to try to prevent it. However, the postwar situation around Taiwan proved to be unstable. As states rebuilt their military capabilities and the domestic political dynamics in both Taiwan and the PRC shifted, tensions increased. The result was that the 2028 Taiwanese presidential elections were a tinderbox. When election rhetoric in Taiwan suggested to Beijing that moves toward formal independence were in progress once again, China resumed hostilities and a second war began just three years after the end of the previous conflict.

Taiwanese Snap Elections and Postwar Peace Talks

In the immediate aftermath of the war, some Taiwanese politicians argued that Taiwan should declare independence. However, the majority—along with U.S. policymakers—believed that a declaration of independence would provoke an immediate resumption of the conflict. In addition to concerns about resumption of conventional war, the possibility of nuclear use continued to hang over the situation. In spite of China’s official no-first-use policy, the United States saw Chinese nuclear use as a possibility given the importance of Taiwan to Chinese interests.²¹⁶ As a result of these dual considerations, the United States discouraged a Taiwanese move toward independence.

The Taiwanese body politic generally reacted to the war with increased national solidarity and antipathy toward China but also blamed the DPP president for stumbling into an avoidable and costly conflict. As protests over the slow initial pace of recovery mounted in late 2025 and opinion polling suggested a collapse in public support, the Taiwanese president and vice president resigned, clearing the way for a snap election to fill the remainder of their term. DPP leaders applied pressure to force the resignations out of concern that the president’s unpopularity could drag down the entire party and set back political progress made toward support for greater autonomy.

The ensuing elections in early 2026 were won by the more charismatic and social media-savvy Kuomintang (KMT) candidate, who moved in the direction of the DPP on cross-strait

²¹⁶ For discussions of China’s no-first-use policy and situations that could cause China to change its mind, see Thomas G. Mahnken, “Future Scenarios of Limited Nuclear Conflict,” in Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner, eds., *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014; Defense Intelligence Agency, *Global Nuclear Landscape 2018*, Washington, D.C., 2018; U.S. Strategic Command, “U.S. Strategic Command and U.S. Northern Command SASC Testimony,” transcript of testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, February 13, 2020.

policy by rejecting Beijing's proposed "one country, two systems" framework for negotiations. At the same time, the KMT candidate sought to avoid provoking another conflict by minimizing discussions about Taiwan's independence and relationship with the United States, including the continued presence of U.S. forces. She took over as a caretaker president, filling the remainder of the presidential term until new elections were due to be held in 2028.

The new KMT president proposed negotiations with the mainland to replace the cease-fire with a more lasting peace agreement. DPP legislators, still a majority in the Legislative Yuan, fiercely criticized the effort as a political stunt with no prospects of bringing tangible benefits for Taiwan. The Taiwanese president promised that no agreement on Taiwan's status would be reached without broad popular support or without international guarantees, especially from the United States. Seeking to strengthen the KMT politically, the PRC agreed to begin informal discussions ("talks about talks"), and the two sides dispatched unofficial negotiating teams to meet in Singapore. Substantial obstacles were immediately apparent, however. Taiwan's continued unwillingness to accept the "One-China" principle and Beijing's refusal to negotiate with Taiwan on an equal footing made substantive negotiations impossible.²¹⁷ The talks ended with both sides convinced that political circumstances would preclude formal discussions from even taking place, much less resulting in a peace agreement. This was politically damaging for the KMT leader, who was criticized as ineffectual.

Taiwanese Recovery and Reactions to U.S. and Chinese Military Developments

The war cost Taiwan's military grievously. It lost most of its air and naval assets and much of its air defense network. In its approach to rebuilding its military, Taiwan aimed to gain the greatest defensive capabilities at the lowest possible cost. As we detail later, Taiwan adopted a "porcupine strategy," meaning it focused on strengthening its defenses to increase the costs of an invasion. Taiwan therefore devalued expensive prestige items in favor of survivable, distributed, and networked defenses that were intended to be resilient and effective, even in the face of prolonged PLA attacks.²¹⁸ Taipei believed that this could deter Beijing from risking another blockade or launching an amphibious invasion by increasing Beijing's estimated costs of those efforts.

In the immediate aftermath of the cease-fire, however, Taipei's resources were highly constrained. Its economy, on life support during the blockade, recovered unsteadily. Foreign and cross-strait investment remained limited. During the conflict, China seized all of Taiwan's roughly \$100 billion in investments on the mainland and refused to return them after the war

²¹⁷ For obstacles regarding PRC-ROC peace agreements, see Phillip C. Saunders and Scott L. Kastner, "Bridge over Troubled Water? Envisioning a China-Taiwan Peace Agreement," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2009.

²¹⁸ For discussions of porcupine strategies, see James R. Holmes, "Taiwan Needs a Maoist Military," *Foreign Policy*, October 17, 2019; and Zhang Baohui, "Taiwan's New Grand Strategy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 69, 2011.

until Taiwan again accepted the “one China two systems” framework.²¹⁹ China also detained many of Taiwan’s citizens living in the PRC. Taiwan had to repair civilian infrastructure and develop more capacity in cyberspace, hardening its vital computer networks; it also expanded stockpiles of critical materials, such as fuel oil, to deter or outlast future blockades. The combination of competing demands and limited resources delayed the pace of Taiwan’s military reform program. As it became clear after 2025 that China was substantially increasing its own military investments, Taiwanese leaders grew increasingly worried about the fragility of peace in the strait. By 2027, Taiwan was delaying all but the most-critical civilian projects to prioritize investments in both munitions and readiness. Taiwan also requested additional U.S. military support.

The United States contributed to Taiwan’s postwar military recovery in both familiar and new ways. Perhaps most notably, it maintained the roughly 2,000 military personnel on Taiwan that had been present at the end of the war. Mindful of the perceptions of both Beijing and Taipei, the United States kept this number of personnel relatively constant through 2026, though it did shift the force makeup away from combat forces and toward liaison and enabling forces designed to help Taiwan implement its porcupine strategy and to build infrastructure and capacity for greater U.S. presence in a future conflict. By 2027, escalating tensions and concern over Chinese rearmament had led to additional modest increases in U.S. presence on Taiwan.

Although the new Taiwanese administration remained hopeful that a future conflict could be avoided if relations were managed carefully, the PRC viewed another war as all but inevitable in the long term. The U.S.-Taiwan military sales, coupled with enduring U.S. presence on the island, led Beijing to believe that the United States was preparing for, perhaps even encouraging, a Taiwanese declaration of independence. Beijing, meanwhile, wanted to ensure that any future return to conflict happened on its timetable. In this environment, following the collapse of the peace talks, both sides felt they had an incentive to discuss CBMs, including rules of engagement, establishment of military-to-military communications, and standards for prior notification of military exercises and deployment. The CBM plan was greeted with cautious optimism by both Taiwanese leaders and outside observers.²²⁰ Although these measures helped prevent military accidents, they did not help build trust between the parties more broadly or address the underlying motivations for future intentional escalation.

²¹⁹ For information regarding the size of Taiwan’s investments in China, see Reuters, “Beijing Revises Law to Make It Easier for Taiwan Companies to Invest in Mainland China,” *South China Morning Post*, December 28, 2019.

²²⁰ This hypothetical postwar CBM plan draws from Bonnie S. Glaser, *Cross-Strait Confidence Building: The Case for Military Confidence-Building Measures*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2005.

Chinese Recovery and Reactions to U.S. and Taiwanese Military Developments

The war caused substantial socioeconomic dislocations within China. Massive state interventions were required to stabilize the Chinese economy in the wake of the conflict, which aggravated structural issues with debt and state-owned enterprises but allowed China to limit the near-term economic effects of the U.S. distant blockade and damage from the war.²²¹ Substantial increases in defense spending, which will be discussed in detail later, further increased domestic economic activity but came at the expense of resources available for external investments, such as BRI, which were sharply curtailed in the aftermath of the conflict. China's aging, and now declining, population placed additional pressures on available resources by 2030, but Beijing was willing to accept trade-offs in other areas to foot the bill for a rapid defense buildup.

Most Chinese citizens were galvanized by the conflict into more actively supporting the CCP, yielding a more nationalistic and bellicose public.²²² The most-hawkish netizens criticized the CCP for failing to seize Taiwan once and for all, and a silent minority criticized the state for not sufficiently safeguarding China's economic prosperity and reducing investments in its social welfare. The handful of dissidents and intellectuals who questioned whether China should stay committed to the reunification of Taiwan were swiftly detained, and some were sentenced to long prison terms as a deterrent to other would-be regime critics. The result was a climate of intimidation in which few were willing to risk openly criticizing the CCP,²²³ and leaders in Beijing could produce an internally convincing portrayal of the United States as determined to use Taiwan as "a final card to play in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to contain China's rise."²²⁴

China's uneven military performance and heavy losses in the conflict caused the PLA to conduct a significant reevaluation of both its military capabilities and operational concepts. The PLA's attention and investments were refocused toward fighting and winning a second war for Taiwan at the expense of developing global force projection capabilities. In the first few years after the end of the conflict, China's defense budget returned to double-digit annual increases, a

²²¹ A recent RAND study estimated that a yearlong severe war with China could cause the Chinese economy to decline by 25 to 35 percent, comparable with the decline in Imperial Germany's economy during World War I. Because the war described in this scenario is shorter, the economic consequences would presumably be smaller—perhaps on the order of a 10–20 percent decline (see Gompert, Cevallos, and Garafola, 2016).

²²² Xiao Han, Michael Sadler, and Kai Quek, "Guns and Butter in China: How Chinese Citizens Respond to Military Spending," *China Quarterly*, March 16, 2020; Susan Shirk, "The Domestic Context of Chinese Foreign Security Policies," in Saadia M. Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot, eds., *Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; Jessica Chen Weiss, "How Hawkish Is the Chinese Public? Another Look at 'Rising Nationalism' and Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 119, 2019.

²²³ China has already been cracking down on domestic dissent under Xi Jinping ("Xu Zhangrun: Outspoken Professor Freed After Six Days," BBC, July 12, 2020).

²²⁴ For recent Chinese criticism of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, see Wang Shushen, "Washington Playing with Fire by Using 'Taiwan Card,'" *China Daily*, August 29, 2019; and Bonnie S. Glaser, Matthew P. Funaiolo, and Brian Hart, *Breaking Down China's 2020 Defense Budget*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 22, 2020.

level that had not been seen for many years.²²⁵ China's postwar military program focused on (1) building up amphibious landing and air assault capabilities and restoring its ability to conduct a large-scale invasion and (2) reconstituting and recapitalizing anti-air and anti-ship missile forces. In addition, China invested heavily in restoring the PLAAF (which suffered heavy losses in both aircraft and pilots) and in building smaller surface warfare assets and conventional submarines.

To offset some of these expenses, China reduced its investments in long-range force projection capabilities and introduced deeper cuts into the PLA ground forces. It also redirected funding from research and development into acquisitions. This meant that it accepted greater risks to its global presence, including the ability to protect its investments and citizens overseas (which expanded more slowly after the war anyway because of the redirection of capital to domestic uses). China also sacrificed future military capabilities to improve its prospects in a near- to medium-term invasion of Taiwan. In doing so, however, China was mindful that maintaining this focus indefinitely would have escalating costs for its broader strategic posture. Beijing therefore became determined to settle the Taiwan issue on its own terms sooner rather than later.

U.S. Recovery and Reactions to Taiwanese and Chinese Military Developments

Although the United States suffered less economic pain than China over the course of the war, it still suffered a retraction associated with the global shock to supply chains, closure of an important market, and a liquidity crunch.²²⁶ The United States lifted its blockade of China and allowed most trade to resume (even with U.S. firms), but it committed more strongly to delinking its economy from China and to retaining some sanctions and other restrictions on PRC imports of technology and key raw materials that would be most relevant to PRC military rebuilding efforts.²²⁷ These disruptions to U.S. trade somewhat reduced overall U.S. economic growth and signaled to Beijing that the United States was preparing for the possibility of another war.

Politically, the war and its consequences defined the presidential term in which they occurred. The nation's leaders saw a large bump in popularity; the U.S. people, who had become increasingly antagonistic toward China over the preceding decade, judged the war to have been a noble defense of democracy against a dangerous and expansionist nation. Despite some disagreements from both the right and the left, a centrist consensus emerged in Washington in support of a U.S. commitment to "stay the course and defend democracy on the island of

²²⁵ China's defense budget in 2030 increased only 6.6 percent, the lowest in many years, as Beijing struggled to deal with the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic (Glaser, Funairole, and Hart, 2020).

²²⁶ Past RAND research suggests that the U.S. economy would decline less than half as much as China's during a conflict (Gompert, Cevallos, and Garafola, 2016).

²²⁷ For more on U.S.-China economic decoupling, see Sagatom Saha and Ashley Feng, "Global Supply Chains, Economic Decoupling, and U.S.-China Relations, Part 1: The View from the United States," *China Brief*, Vol. 20, No. 6, April 2020.

Taiwan” while not actively encouraging Taiwan’s modification of its de jure political status. The Taiwanese KMT president’s restraint regarding the mainland further reduced the pressure on the United States to adopt a formal position on Taiwanese independence.

China’s postwar military investments and continued embrace of a hard line on the Taiwan issue encouraged U.S. planners to assume a high risk of conflict recurrence. This led U.S. military planners to prioritize the readiness and posture of its forces available to be deployed to the Western Pacific, drawing down heavily from Europe and the Middle East to do so. This risk also drove an increase in the defense budget for FYs 2026–2029. These budget increases enabled the U.S. military to begin addressing a variety of problems revealed by the previous war. For example, it began resolving logistical weaknesses that impeded U.S. operations throughout the previous conflict by hardening supply depots and logistical computer networks, increasing stocks of forward-deployed munitions and other materiel, and acquiring additional replenishment ships and airlift.²²⁸

The war also confirmed that U.S. air bases were vulnerable to ballistic and cruise missile strikes. This threat had been known before the war and had been a priority for the Pacific Air Forces, but the forces gained more funds after the war for an even more extensive theaterwide effort to improve air base defenses through both active defenses and passive defenses, such as hardening and distributed basing.²²⁹ These expenses reduced the relative share of funding available for acquisitions, but the United States still increased its defense budgets to accelerate procurement of F-35s, B-21s, penetrating UAVs, and minesweepers and unmanned underwater vehicles—equipment that was thought to be critical for a future Taiwan scenario. The Marine Corps budget increased largely at the expense of the Army, which was forced to cut end strength. Funding for the U.S. Space Force also increased as work continued on hardening space infrastructure and restoring lost capabilities. Because wartime losses also aggravated the Navy’s struggle to field enough ships to meet its global commitments, it chose to extend the life of some

²²⁸ Recent RAND studies have identified both Chinese incentives to attack and U.S. logistics system vulnerabilities during major conflict (Don Snyder, George E. Hart, Kristin F. Lynch, and John G. Drew, *Ensuring U.S. Air Force Operations During Cyber Attacks Against Combat Support Systems: Guidance for Where to Focus Mitigation Efforts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-620-AF, 2015; Don Snyder, Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Mahyar A. Amouzegar, Kristin F. Lynch, Mary Lee, and John G. Drew, *Robust and Resilient Logistics Operations in a Degraded Information Environment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2015-AF, 2017; Bradley Martin and Roland J. Yardley, *Approaches to Strategic Sealift Readiness*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3049-NAVY, 2019).

²²⁹ RAND research has found that air bases are increasingly vulnerable to both ballistic and cruise missiles. Previous RAND analysis modeling the vulnerability of U.S. air bases to Chinese attacks has found that base hardening, active defenses, and aircraft dispersal would improve the resiliency of U.S. air assets (Alan J. Vick, Sean M. Zeigler, Julia Brackup, and John Speed Meyers, *Air Base Defense: Rethinking Army and Air Force Roles and Functions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4368-AF, 2020).

large surface combatants slated for retirement in the mid-2020s, notably *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers and *Ticonderoga*-class cruisers.²³⁰

Over the years following the conflict, the United States ultimately proved more willing to sell weapons to Taiwan than to expand its forward-deployed forces there. Opponents objected to placing U.S. troops within range of China's short-range missiles, but there were growing demands at the same time for the United States to deploy additional naval and air assets to assist Taiwan in deterring and responding to repeated Chinese incursions. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, the United States decided to station some fighter aircraft on Taiwan to help the Taiwanese challenge PLAAF air intrusions—although the Pentagon expected that those aircraft would rebase farther from China in an escalating crisis and communicated this intention to Taipei. After a lengthy debate and series of negotiations with Taiwan triggered by the escalation of tensions associated with Taiwan's misperceived 2026 military exercise, it also deployed additional ISR assets to the island, along with an additional Marine Littoral Regiment in 2027 (including newly operational Navy Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System units).²³¹

In some respects, the U.S. force presence on Taiwan after the conflict paralleled its role on the Korean peninsula, albeit with a smaller overall troop presence. In both cases, a relatively small number of U.S. troops carried great strategic and political significance; its integrating function between the host nation and U.S. military capabilities was more consequential than its inherent combat capabilities. But several differences were conspicuous—most notably, China represented a vastly more potent threat to the security both of Taiwan and the U.S. forces there than North Korea did to the South. In addition, there was not a large U.S. airpower presence on the island (as has long existed in South Korea) because such a deployment would be vulnerable to destruction in a Chinese fire strike. Although the small squadrons of F-35Bs and rotary-wing aviation deployed with the Marine Corps were able to operate in a more dispersed posture and filled some of this gap, a renewed conflict with China would require U.S. forces on the island to receive air support via aircraft flying from more-distant bases or aircraft carriers.

International Reactions

The 2025 war led to substantial apprehension among China's neighbors about the possibility of a renewed war. States in Southeast Asia were hit particularly hard by the war; the loss of trade with both the PRC and Taiwan was only partly offset by the relocation of certain supply chains from the belligerents to their countries during the war. Many states remained sympathetic to Taiwan and viewed China's initiation of the conflict negatively, but they were also greatly

²³⁰ For a summary of projected naval force levels resulting from the Navy's shipbuilding plan, see Congressional Research Service, *Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL32665, March 11, 2021.

²³¹ Megan Eckstein, "Marines Testing Regiment at Heart of Emerging Island-Hopping Future," *USNI News*, 2020; Shawn Snow, "New Marine Littoral Regiment, Designed to Fight in Contested Maritime Environment, Coming to Hawaii," *Marine Corps Times*, 2020b.

concerned about the potential for a return to conflict that could once again disrupt their own economies. Although eager, in principle, to resume prewar economic relationships with the belligerents, states and private firms viewed investment in and trade with Taiwan to be an increasingly risky proposition. Economic ties between Taiwan and many of its Asian neighbors became weaker, although these losses were partly offset by increases in U.S. and Japanese investment.

Foreign investment in the PRC was also substantially affected by the conflict. Although the U.S. distant blockade had been short in duration (lasting roughly three months), it still disrupted numerous supply chains that relied on “just in time” manufacturing and inventory processes. Many companies were forced to seek alternatives, usually elsewhere in Asia. After the war, some of these temporary solutions became permanent, and overall trade and investment with China fell. New investment in China decreased notably throughout 2026 and 2027 as foreign investors grew concerned that persistent tensions could lead to a reprise of the 2025 blockades and sought more-reliable alternatives. The result was that, by 2028, foreign dependence on China as a market and destination for investment had declined substantially from its prewar high, reducing Chinese leverage over its neighbors and somewhat improving the relative economic fortunes of other states in Southeast and South Asia.

Meanwhile, China’s own investments in other countries were substantially reduced in the aftermath of the war. The need to prioritize defense spending increases and domestic economic stability coupled with increasing demographic weaknesses greatly reduced the availability of funds for additional BRI investments. For existing Chinese investments and loans that came due after the war, China became increasingly inflexible regarding potential deferments, demanding more-immediate returns. Both developments increased tensions with existing BRI recipients and created a sense throughout Asia and Africa that the period of expansion in Chinese influence and clout had at least paused and could even have moved into retreat as China became preoccupied by its conflict with Taiwan and the United States.

The postwar environment represented an increasingly difficult tightrope to walk for most U.S. allies in Asia. With the United States and Japan now openly committed to the defense of Taiwan (including an ongoing U.S. troop presence there), other U.S. allies—such as South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia—came under increasing pressure from the United States and Japan to enhance their own security ties with Taipei. Although wanting to be perceived as supportive of U.S. efforts for the sake of bilateral alliances with Washington, these allies also assessed that the risk of conflict recurrence was high and were hesitant to take steps that could cause China to target them at the outset of any resumption of hostilities. These allies were also motivated to preserve their robust economic relationships with the PRC, although they increasingly explored alternative sources for strategically important resources or components, including rare earths or technology imports. All three U.S. allies enhanced their military-to-military ties with Taipei but avoided more-overt political demonstrations of support or joint exercises with both Taiwan and the United States.

U.S. European allies were also greatly concerned by the conflict and its indeterminate aftermath. Although these allies were initially eager to resume trade with both China and Taiwan after the blockades were lifted and to minimize their own economic exposure, Chinese prestige suffered in Europe, where it was largely blamed for initiating the conflict and breaking decades of peace in East Asia. Europe increased restrictions on Chinese investment in sensitive industries or infrastructure, and popular divestment movements began in northern Europe to reduce European investment in what came to be seen as belligerent, repressive China. At the 2026 NATO summit in Berlin, the alliance also quietly clarified an ambiguity in the North Atlantic Treaty to confirm that attacks on Hawaii could be grounds for triggering Article V in support of the United States, intended as a signal to China not to return to or further escalate hostilities.²³²

Taiwanese Domestic Political Tensions and Creation of a Precipitating Event

Taiwan's interim KMT president struggled with a balancing act of trying to reduce tensions with the mainland and trying to reduce growing popular discontent over Beijing's continued violations of Taiwanese airspace and territorial waters, Taiwan's sluggish economic recovery, and the PRC refusal to return Taiwanese citizens and investments seized during the war. By 2028, a supermajority of citizens appeared to believe that Taiwan should have declared independence during the war, and a simple majority supported a renewed push for a formal declaration of independence; this stemmed from both a postwar surge in Taiwanese nationalism and a growing belief that a return to conflict was inevitable until Taiwan achieved widespread international recognition for its independence.²³³ In this context, a series of military encounters among Chinese, Taiwanese, and U.S. forces once again increased tensions in the strait. CCG and maritime militia craft repeatedly entered Taiwan's territorial water on suspected mining operations. PLA aircraft violated Taiwanese airspace and often went unchallenged because of Taiwan's shrunken air force. These activities fanned Taiwanese citizens' dissatisfaction with the status quo and helped propel the DPP candidate to a commanding lead in the polls heading into the general election. Although the candidate maintained ambiguity regarding his position toward a new Taiwanese constitution or an overt declaration of independence, it was widely known that he supported independence during the war, and it was speculated that formal independence was his ultimate ambition as president.

Much like it had three years earlier, Beijing viewed this prospect as unacceptable. Moreover, it assessed that the extant status quo was inherently unsustainable, considering the trajectory of Taiwanese politics, the presence of U.S. soldiers on Chinese territory, and the opportunity costs of China's own singular focus on reconstituting the ability to conduct an invasion of the island.

²³² See Chapter 2 for a discussion on the ambiguity of Hawaii.

²³³ In this scenario, the war accelerates recent Taiwanese public opinion trends, which are discussed in Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, *In Taiwan, Views of Mainland China Mostly Negative*, Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, May 12, 2020.

China therefore anticipated the need for a near-term military solution. The CMC had also decided that China must never again allow itself to be forced into an unexpected war over Taiwan, attributing many operational setbacks in the past war to its initial failure to seize the initiative, preempt U.S. intervention, and achieve information superiority (and, thereby, to control the pace and intensity of the conflict). It viewed the risk of once again reacting to Taiwanese movement toward independence as comparable with, perhaps even greater than, the risks endemic to a preemptive Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

After the DPP candidate won the 2028 elections, Beijing ordered the PLA to conduct a snap littoral exercise in the Eastern and Southern Theater Commands, which placed conventional forces in those regions on alert. Taiwanese and U.S. analysts accurately interpreted these exercises as a cover for a resumption of hostilities, and Taiwan placed its own military on heightened alert. In this environment, a Taiwanese air defense battery shot at a formation of PLAAF fighters flying in Taiwanese airspace toward Taipei, which had ignored repeated orders to withdraw, downing one of the planes. Seizing on the opportunity that this presented, Beijing declared that Taiwan and the United States had violated the terms of the cease-fire, requiring China to take defensive steps.

In January 2029, the fragile peace in the Taiwan Strait ended. The CMC ordered the PLA to immediately execute a series of joint campaigns against U.S. and Taiwanese forces in the Pacific. China placed its nuclear forces on alert, and PLA units moved to seize command of the air and sea around Taiwan and to blunt the intervention of any additional U.S. forces long enough to enable PLA amphibious and air assault forces to occupy Taiwan. The postwar period ended abruptly in a resumption of hostilities.

Key Issues in the Post-Conflict Environment

Territorial and Major Domestic Political Change

As the conflict entered a frozen stage, Chinese forces were in control of the offshore islands of Kinmen and Matsu and of the Penghu Islands closer to Taiwan. Taiwan was still not recognized as independent by any countries other than its small number of official diplomatic allies. Even though the United States appeared to be accepting a long-term military presence on Taiwan and a commitment to the island's defense, it refrained from recognizing Taiwan as an independent country, a move that U.S. leaders worried would risk quickly reigniting the conflict, and would in any event be at odds with Taiwan's internal determination not to declare its independence. U.S. allies and partners in Asia and Europe did not grant official diplomatic recognition to Taiwan either. The aftermath of the war, as already discussed, did lead to substantial political turmoil and leadership changes on Taiwan, including a KMT victory in snap elections held in early 2026, followed by a new DPP candidate winning a clear victory in 2028

elections, which Beijing decided to use as an opportunity to restart hostilities on its own terms in early 2029.

The conflict brought out a diversity of opinions regarding the proper course for Taiwan's security policies in the 2026–2028 period. Some KMT leaders viewed the U.S. defense commitment with skepticism, especially because of Taiwan's greater vulnerability to invasion following the PLA's seizure of the Penghus, and advocated a more conciliatory approach to the mainland.²³⁴ A few prominent figures in the national security establishment proposed that Taiwan acquire nuclear weapons to ensure its ability to deter China. However, other officials—including the new KMT president—were worried that an attempt to develop nuclear weapons could trigger a new cross-strait conflict with China and undermine U.S. support for Taiwan, noting that Taiwan's previous efforts to develop nuclear weapons in the 1970s and 1980s were abandoned as a result of U.S. pressure.²³⁵ Following a few months of internal debate, Taiwan ruled out any effort to develop nuclear weapons. Instead, Taiwan's president determined that the best path was increased defense spending to build up Taiwan's conventional defenses, building on defense concepts under development prior to the conflict.²³⁶ Rather than replace lost capabilities on a one-for-one basis, Taiwanese leaders decided that they must embrace a porcupine strategy devaluing expensive prestige items in favor of survivable, distributed, and networked defenses intended to be resilient and effective even in the face of prolonged PLA attacks.²³⁷

Taiwan increased its budget to a level that was sufficient to develop or acquire a variety of conventional asymmetrical capabilities that would make it more difficult for China to successfully invade Taiwan in the future. These capabilities included mobile coastal defense cruise missiles, mobile air defense systems, fast-attack patrol boats with ASCMs, multiple-launch rocket systems with submunitions, and self-propelled sea mines. Taiwan also increased investments in upgrading and training its reserve forces.²³⁸ Moreover, Taiwan highlighted intensified training intended to enable its reserves to conduct long-term resistance against enemy occupation forces, a development that appeared to be aimed at strengthening deterrence by convincing China that even if it were successful in any future invasion attempt, the outcome would only be a long-term conflict involving a protracted insurgency.

²³⁴ For a discussion of allied abandonment fears generally, see Glenn H. Snyder, 1984.

²³⁵ “U.S. Put Pressure on Taiwan to End Alleged Nuclear Quest in 1970s,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2007; Togzhan Kassenova, *Global Non-Proliferation and the Taiwan Dilemma*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2012.

²³⁶ On Taiwan's defense concepts, see Thompson, 2018.

²³⁷ For the contours of various approaches to such a porcupine strategy, see Holmes, 2019; and Jim Thomas, Iskander Rehman, and John Stillion, *Hard ROC 2.0: Taiwan and Deterrence Through Protraction*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2014.

²³⁸ For a recent reference to reserve forces participating in annual exercises, see “Taiwan Annual War Games Start with Deployment of Reserve Forces,” *Focus Taiwan*, July 13, 2020.

The United States contributed substantially to Taiwan's postwar military recovery. It provided high-power microwave systems to Taiwan designed to counter small drones and sought to accelerate the development, deployment, and sale of directed-energy anti-missile and anti-air systems.²³⁹ The U.S. military also increased its assistance to and interoperability with Taiwan's armed forces, conducting a regular cadence of training events within Taiwanese territory to bolster the capabilities of Taiwan's air, air defense, coastal defense cruise missile, SOF, and ground force units. Washington also deployed its own distributed land-based anti-ship fires to Taiwan as part of a modest increase in U.S. posture on the island.²⁴⁰

The United States offered to sell upgraded F-16V fighters—many of Taiwan's surviving pilots were experienced operators of these planes, allowing them to quickly enter service—at subsidized rates, primarily to provide Taiwan with the ability to conduct peacetime intercepts of PLA aircraft. In light of apparently successful Taiwanese wartime counterespionage efforts against previous PRC infiltration, the United States also indicated its willingness to export the F-35B fighter in the future. However, Taiwan's porcupine strategy and financial constraints meant that its appetite for exquisite platforms was limited. Instead, Taiwan concentrated most of its resources on importing intelligent sea mines, unmanned platforms, and cruise missiles.²⁴¹

Above all else, however, Taiwan's interim KMT president sought to avoid another war with the mainland while not committing to a process that would lead to unification under Beijing's de jure or de facto rule. For this reason, she prioritized maintaining close ties with the United States and strengthening unofficial relations with other democratic countries in the region and beyond. As the United States shifted more resources to strengthening its ability to help defend Taiwan in the years following the conflict, its commitment was viewed as increasingly solid. This led some politicians in Taiwan to suggest that the time was right for Taiwan to push for formal independence.²⁴² The KMT president and her advisers urged caution on that front, however, expressing the concern that doing so could increase the risk of conflict recurrence and lead to friction with the United States. The DPP candidate victorious in the 2028 campaign was believed

²³⁹ Congressional Research Service, *Navy Lasers, Railgun, and Gun-Launched Guided Projectile: Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C., R44175, July 28, 2020c.

²⁴⁰ The pursuit of these capabilities is highlighted in 2019 Marine Corps guidance that advances a vision of “Stand-in Forces” in the Western Pacific that “create a competitive advantage and facilitate deterrence in the INDOPACOM Theater,” supported by expeditionary advance bases. As envisioned, these will consist of forces intended to “reverse the cost imposition that determined adversaries seek to impose on the joint force,” including capabilities under development, such as “High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) batteries armed with long-range anti-ship missiles” and other “smaller, low signature, affordable platforms that can economically host a dense array of lethal and non-lethal payloads.” See U.S. Marine Corps, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, Washington, D.C., 2019.

²⁴¹ For a discussion of how Taiwan might embrace such a strategy, see “China's Might Is Forcing Taiwan to Rethink Its Military Strategy,” *The Economist*, January 26, 2019.

²⁴² For a discussion of the risk that states might become emboldened to adopt riskier policies when they have a high level of confidence in their ally's commitment, see Glenn H. Snyder, 1984.

to have substantially less cautious views, but China resumed the conflict before these could be tested.

Resulting Distribution of Power and Capabilities

Although the United States sustained significant losses over the course of the conflict, and China's military seemed to have been set back substantially, Taiwan suffered grievously. Its air and naval forces were essentially destroyed. As a result, the proximate bilateral military balance between Taiwan and China in the immediate aftermath of the war clearly appeared to have shifted toward the mainland. At the same time, however, China's losses meant that the United States and Japan maintained a strong advantage across the wider theater. Many U.S. losses during the conflict could be at least temporarily replaced by transferring forces from other regions.

From 2026 to 2029, however, Chinese leaders focused massive investments on developing a narrow set of capabilities intended to enable the PRC to fight and win a resumption of the war for Taiwan at the expense of other priorities, both military and nonmilitary. Over the same period, the United States also maintained its strategic focus on the Western Pacific and increased its defense spending but at a slower rate. Taiwan rebuilt its armed forces, but, as previously noted, did so even more slowly. As a result, although the overall balance of Sino-American military power continued to favor the United States in 2028, China believed that it had gained a military advantage in the Taiwan straits that would allow it to successfully invade the island despite U.S. resistance. China's leaders worried that their extant levels of military expenditures were unsustainable, particularly given their rapidly aging population and demographic challenges, and that the likelihood of a successful invasion could decline in the future if Taiwan were to improve its defenses or U.S. investments were to begin to bear fruit. By 2028, then, China was increasingly incentivized to resolve the Taiwan issue using force in the near term.

Effects of Counterspace Operations

The relatively limited or reversible damage inflicted on both U.S. and Chinese communications and ISR constellations in LEO during the 2025 phase of the conflict still took significant investments to mend, which both adversaries had largely accomplished by 2029. The war produced a relatively small amount of LEO debris that did not significantly increase the danger to commercial satellites. Although the long-term economic consequences of wartime counterspace operations were relatively minor, both major belligerents made substantial investments in developing new, distributed satellite architectures to support ISR and C2.²⁴³

²⁴³ For more information on the benefits of distributed satellite systems, see Preston, 2004.

Effects of Cyberspace Operations

In the interwar period, all sides invested in increased cybersecurity and redundancy to limit exposure to damage in a future conflict; in doing so, they prioritized defensive over offensive cyber capabilities. By 2029, all sides believed they were less vulnerable than they had been in 2025, though with a high degree of uncertainty given their lack of knowledge about the preparations of their adversaries.

China's Grand Strategy

China's increasingly insular post-conflict grand strategy was largely focused on ensuring domestic political stability while preventing Taiwan from moving toward or achieving independence and preparing for a resumption of war against the United States and its allies. The conflict hardened the views of CCP leaders and senior officers on the reintegration of Taiwan, which they now believed would occur only through force. Moreover, successfully reintegrating Taiwan—having already fought one unsuccessful war to do so—came to be seen as a matter of regime survival. CCP fears of domestic political reaction to a second failure to secure the island motivated Beijing to bear substantial costs to ensure that a future conflict would be fought successfully and on its terms.

Although Beijing would have liked to continue pursuing other global priorities, such as further expansion of its economic and diplomatic reach outside Asia, fiscal realities forced it to scale back its ambitions in some areas to focus on Taiwan and domestic stability. For example, postwar increases in defense spending and economic reconstruction helped to boost domestic economic activity but came at the expense of resources available for external investments, such as BRI activities, which were sharply curtailed in the aftermath of the conflict.²⁴⁴ Given these opportunity costs, many Chinese military strategists and leaders concluded that a near-term return to conflict over Taiwan was preferable (as soon as Chinese forces were able to recover sufficiently to execute it) because doing so would minimize the time that the PRC was required to invest so disproportionately in a Taiwan invasion at the expense of other national goals.

China also attempted to use its economic clout to punish the United States for its intervention and continued presence on Taiwan by dumping U.S. treasury bonds, seizing U.S. assets in China, placing restrictions on U.S. goods and service trade exports, and intensifying its efforts to replace the dollar as a global reserve currency. These measures slowed down the U.S. and global economic recovery but did not lead to a large-scale U.S. financial panic or the collapse of the dollar, in spite of the United States' consistently high interwar deficits.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ China particularly reduced BRI investments in areas that were proving to be expensive or problematic, such as by curtailing some commitments to Pakistan and scaling back longer-term efforts to improve influence in Europe.

²⁴⁵ Postwar economic insecurity throughout the world led to increased demand for U.S. treasuries among non-PRC investors as a safe haven. Although China's sell-off of its U.S. holdings did lead to higher U.S. interest rates, increased demand from other actors meant that these did not become high enough to prevent U.S. spending on

In an effort to increase foreign pressure on the United States and Taiwan, Beijing launched international information campaigns that portrayed the conflict as a self-defensive battle in a long war that would “inevitably unify the motherland and defeat Taiwan separatists doing the bidding of a wantonly aggressive United States.” The information campaigns had limited effectiveness; most states—although interested in resuming prewar economic arrangements with China—viewed China as the aggressor.

Militarily, China assessed that it had several acute concerns in the aftermath of the war. Beijing judged that its ability to conduct a successful invasion of Taiwan in the immediate postwar period was compromised, although it explored new means of seizing Taiwan enabled by its seizure of the Penghu Islands, which it heavily fortified as an advance base for A2AD, air assault, and amphibious forces. China’s interwar military program invested heavily in four areas:

1. amphibious landing and air assault capabilities intended to restore China’s ability to execute a large-scale invasion of Taiwan
2. anti-air, missile defense, and countermine systems to defeat anticipated U.S. and Taiwanese defensive measures
3. long-range strike systems to help defeat U.S. follow-on forces
4. restoring the PLAAF, which suffered heavy losses in both aircraft and pilots.

Although China also publicly announced the deployment of an intercontinental ballistic missile-class hypersonic glide vehicles, which it stated gave the PLARF the ability to conduct conventional precision strikes against key targets throughout the United States, it chose not to invest in acquiring a large number of the systems because of their high cost.²⁴⁶

United States’ Grand Strategy

The United States emerged from the conflict heavily focused on the broader challenge of maintaining an overall political-military edge over China and on the narrower challenge of defending Taiwan from invasion. Assessing that China now posed a more acute threat to U.S. security and that conflict recurrence over Taiwan was likely, the United States increased defense spending and focused greater attention on the military and nonmilitary challenges posed by China. Washington sought to serve as the nucleus in a grand countervailing coalition of regional states opposed to China’s military expansionism.

The United States lost substantial forces during the war, but its economy and industrial base were relatively less affected, which enabled it to increase these resources, although not without

military and economic reconstruction. Instead, the increase in interest rates raised the longer-term costs that the United States would face from deficit spending. For more on the risk to the U.S. economy if China sells, see Richard Leong, “Explainer: Will China Dump U.S. Bonds as a Trade Weapon? Not So Fast,” Reuters, May 2019.

²⁴⁶ In February 2020, U.S. officials publicly stated that China was testing such a capability and described this capability as similar to a Russian hypersonic glide vehicle system also under development (U.S. Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command, “Statement of General Terrence J. O’Shaughnessy, United States Air Force Commander,” testimony presented before U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on February 13, 2020, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, 2020).

trade-offs. The United States also emerged from the crisis committed to further delinking its economy from China—a goal furthered by China’s own punitive economic measures—including through new rules governing supply chains for U.S. firms.²⁴⁷ Although the United States was able to increase defense spending to some extent in the aftermath of the war, concern over rising deficits and debt levels pushed policymakers in Washington to recognize the need to make difficult trade-offs to maintain readiness and rebuild capabilities for a recurrence of conflict with China while keeping defense spending within sustainable limits.

The United States signaled it was willing to take on greater risk outside the Indo-Pacific region to free up resources and attention for the contest with China. In Europe, the United States withdrew forces and increasingly signaled to its European allies that they would need to bear a larger share of the burden of defending NATO members from Russia. In the Middle East, the United States also scaled back its commitments.²⁴⁸

Geopolitical Relationships

In the wake of the cease-fire, the United States encouraged all its allies and partners to isolate China and expand contact with Taiwan, seeking to increase Chinese perceptions of the scale of resistance that China could face in a repeat conflict and deter it from initiating one. However, with the Sino-American stalemate widely viewed as unstable, most countries in Asia were particularly hesitant to take steps that might draw them directly into another war over Taiwan. Only Japan and Australia viewed helping the United States with Taiwan as important to their own security.

Japan

Alongside the United States, Japan was the country most committed to supporting Taiwan in the aftermath of the war. Tokyo viewed Taiwan as important to its own defense and security interests, and it observed China’s postwar investments in amphibious capabilities with alarm (given their obvious utility in seizing disputed Japanese territory). Therefore, Japan was willing to quietly strengthen its security ties with Taiwan as a form of forward defense of Japanese interests.²⁴⁹ This included participating in defense strategy dialogues with representatives from the United States and Taiwan, ISR sharing, providing military advisers to Taiwan, and educational exchanges. The war also fueled support for further normalization of Japan’s military and a larger defense budget, allowing it to replace capabilities lost in the war and improve its air

²⁴⁷ This somewhat reduced overall U.S. economic growth but also signaled to Beijing that the United States was preparing for the possibility of another war.

²⁴⁸ These bases included existing key facilities in Qatar and Diego Garcia.

²⁴⁹ For a discussion of how Japan views Taiwan as a security interest, see Harold et al., 2019.

defenses, amphibious forces, and land-based anti-ship capabilities.²⁵⁰ It also significantly increased the JSDF presence in its southwestern islands. Although the U.S.-Japan relationship remained robust, Japan's normalization and expansion of its military unnerved South Korea, causing the United States to have to work harder to facilitate cooperation between its two allies.²⁵¹

Australia

Australia suffered significant economic losses during the war, both because of the U.S. distant blockade of China—which Australia supported, despite this closing off an important market for its commodity exports—and because of the concomitant global economic shock. Nonetheless, Australia continued to closely align itself with the United States in the interwar period by allowing the U.S. Marine Corps and the USAF to operate from Darwin. Australian political leadership stated it that would “vigorously defend its democratic values and those of others in the region,” which many observers believed to be a tacit declaration of its readiness to support Taiwan in a future conflict. Australia also increased its defense spending and security ties with other partners, including Japan and Singapore. However, Canberra was concerned that conflict might reignite and that China would seek in a future war to target Australia, both kinetically and through offensive cyberoperations against Australian institutions and businesses.²⁵² As a result, Australia sought to acquire improved long-range anti-ship and missile defense systems, develop hypersonic weapons, and harden its cyberdefenses.²⁵³ Although it continued to trade with Beijing, it acceded to U.S. pressure to constrain some key raw materials exports to China, notably iron ore and liquified natural gas (LNG), to slow China's rebuilding of its defense capabilities and make it more difficult for Beijing to build up stockpiles that could better enable it to weather a repeat of the U.S. distant blockade in the future.²⁵⁴

The Philippines

In the wake of the conflict, China did not shy from using economic threats and enticements to prevent the Philippines from revisiting the question of U.S. access. Manila had little interest in being dragged into a future war with China but wanted to keep the United States as a guarantor of Philippine territorial integrity. As China remilitarized and recovered economically, signs were

²⁵⁰ For a discussion of earlier steps toward normalization because of a rapidly evolving security environment, see Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2020.

²⁵¹ South Korea has long feared a remilitarized Japan (James L. Schoff, *Navigating Rocky Japan–South Korea Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019).

²⁵² Such an attack recently occurred; Australia blamed China. Colin Packham, “Australia Sees China as Main Suspect in State-Based Cyberattacks, Sources Say,” Reuters, June 18, 2020.

²⁵³ These are items that are highlighted in Australia's 2020 defense budget. “Australia Seeks Long-Range Missiles in Indo-Pacific Defence Shift,” BBC, July 1, 2020.

²⁵⁴ China has relatively few alternatives to Australian iron ore and LNG imports (Huileng Tan, “China May Punish Australia with Trade Curbs—But It Can't Stop Buying Iron Ore from Down Under,” CNBC, June 11, 2020).

clear that another war would come soon. As a result, the Philippines continued to deny U.S. requests for access, accepting the risk of losing the United States as a security guarantor. Instead, the Philippines sought to improve defense relations with other ASEAN member states and to embark on its own porcupine defense strategy.

South Korea

South Korea found itself in a strategic dilemma in the wake of the 2025 war. It wished to maintain its alliance with the United States while sustaining cooperation with China on economics, trade, and North Korea.²⁵⁵ China's responsibility for initiating the 2025 war gave Seoul support from the South Korean public—which was growing increasingly anti-Chinese—to lean more toward supporting the United States. Still, South Korean leaders remained wary both of potential Chinese economic reprisals similar to those that had occurred following South Korea's support for the U.S. Theater High Altitude Area Defense and of the potential for South Korea to be targeted militarily in a repeat conflict over Taiwan.²⁵⁶ As a result, South Korea continued to provide intelligence support to the United States but was unwilling to become more deeply involved in military preparations for the defense of Taiwan. Seoul also resisted U.S. pressure to reduce its high volume of trade with China, although it did take some targeted steps to reduce technology exports and transfers to China that the United States feared could help the PLA develop more-advanced capabilities.

Other States in Asia

As already noted, other states in Southeast Asia were also hesitant to link themselves more tightly with the defense of Taiwan because of the potential for conflict recurrence and subsequent Chinese retaliation. Singapore was the most active of these states, continuing to support limited U.S. air and naval forces stationed at its port while sharing ISR. Singapore also sought to develop its regional security ties by strengthening defense links with Australia and Japan and conducting military exercises and training with each country.²⁵⁷ Other Southeast Asian countries adopted more-cautious strategies. Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia were particularly concerned about the potential for Chinese aggression in disputed territorial waters in the South China Sea and increased their defense expenditures—particularly in the areas of ISR, maritime domain awareness, and anti-ship capabilities—to detect and deter Chinese forces.

Thailand, which had drawn closer to China prior to the conflict because of Chinese support for its authoritarian government and an increase in military trade and arms sales, refused U.S. offers of closer security cooperation and moved to bolster economic and military ties with

²⁵⁵ Harold et al., 2019.

²⁵⁶ Public polling in 2019 suggested that, after Japan, South Koreans held the worst opinion of China in East and Southeast Asia and among of the lowest opinions of China on earth (Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "People Around the Globe Are Divided in Their Opinions of China," Pew Research Center, December 5, 2019).

²⁵⁷ Australia and Singapore have recently deepened defense ties (Parameswaran, 2020).

Beijing.²⁵⁸ However, all of these countries expanded trade relations with India and Australia, seeking to improve economic security through dealings with trade partners that were not likely to be as directly involved in a future Taiwan conflict.

U.S. hopes for a grand countervailing coalition of Southeast Asian states against China, therefore, did not come to fruition. There was no formal ASEAN-level discussion of Taiwan issues among its members, and there was little appetite to push for a consensus that would have excluded clearly pro-Beijing states, such as Laos or Cambodia. One further result of the divergent approaches by states in Southeast Asia was the clear reduction in importance of ASEAN. ASEAN meetings were attended by increasingly lower-level officials, and all members ceased to view the body as an important vehicle for regional cooperation and interests, which were now seen to be too often contradictory. Although ASEAN continued to exist through 2030, some states were beginning to openly consider withdrawing or pursuing the development of alternative regional bodies among strategically like-minded states.

India

Following the 2025 war, New Delhi was concerned by China's use of military force because of India's own territorial disputes with China. India did not wish to be recruited into a Washington-led coalition committed to defend Taiwan but did pursue closer defense ties with the United States, Japan, and particularly Australia through both bilateral exercises and multinational mechanisms, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. India intended these exercises to demonstrate (and improve) its capacity to contribute to future maritime operations in the eastern Indian Ocean; India also sought to increase Chinese perceptions that other powers might come to India's aid if it were attacked by Beijing in the future. New Delhi sought to build up its own air defense and strike capabilities, including by acquiring fifth-generation fighter aircraft, which had proven their effectiveness in combat against China in 2025, from the United States.

India also took diplomatic and economic advantage of China's focuses on internal recovery and rebuilding capabilities for Taiwan, which led to a decrease in Chinese activity elsewhere in Asia. India increased defense cooperation with Australia and Indonesia on maritime issues in the Indian Ocean region—a continuation of activities that had been occurring prior to the conflict.²⁵⁹ India also saw an opportunity to increase economic and trade ties in Southeast Asia when those

²⁵⁸ Storey, 2019.

²⁵⁹ For example, Indonesia has agreed to allow India to build a port in the strategic Sabang Islands ("Eyeing Southeast Asia, India Builds Port in Indonesia," *Economic Times*, March 20, 2019). Australia and India recently signed a strategic agreement with a military maritime cooperation component (Rob Harris, "New Strategic Agreement with India Signed to Counter China's Influence," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 4, 2020; Brad Lendon, "India and Australia Sign Pacts to Strengthen Military Ties as Tensions Simmer in the South China Sea," CNN, June 4, 2020).

states sought to identify trading partners less likely to be affected by future U.S.-PRC hostilities.²⁶⁰

Allies and Partners in Europe

NATO allies and other U.S. partners in Europe entered the postwar period with a degree of trepidation. The United States' increasingly narrow focus after 2025 on deterring and defeating China near Taiwan came at the expense of much of its traditional force posture in Europe and the Middle East. Many European leaders feared that this withdrawal of U.S. forces would increase the risk of instability or conflict on Europe's periphery. In reaction, Germany slowly increased its defense budget, much of which went to raising the Bundeswehr's readiness. Poland, which had invested heavily in developing a close security partnership with the United States, felt increasingly insecure and increased its own capabilities while seeking closer defense ties with Western European states. France saw both an opportunity and a need for a European collective defense system independent of NATO and invested considerable diplomatic energy in strengthening security relationships within the EU. The UK, meanwhile, reacted by increasing its alignment with U.S. goals in Asia, both to help ensure a continued U.S. commitment to the UK's defense and to maintain its own great power ambitions in the Pacific.

Following the cease-fire, NATO member states under pressure from Washington maintained limited sanctions on China in areas involving technology imports or other goods with potential military applications. But trade between China and Europe more broadly resumed after the war, with most European states arguing that returning to economic normality and rebuilding cooperative ties represented the best way of restoring global stability. Trade volumes remained lower than before the war, however: Many firms perceived a heightened risk premium with basing their supply chains in the PRC, given the potential for conflict recurrence, and sought alternatives. Chinese BRI investments in Europe were cut back sharply after the war as China refocused its capital internally, which led to an overall reduced Chinese profile and influence in Europe. This decline in Beijing's influence in Europe was exacerbated by European public views of China as an aggressive, repressive actor following the war. France, for example, faced little pushback as it continued to sell arms to Taiwan to support the rebuilding of its military.

Russia

Russia viewed itself as a major beneficiary of the conflict. Its primary adversary, the United States, suffered significant military and economic damage; more importantly, Washington's focus on Taiwan after 2025 distracted its attention to (and reduced its resources in) regions more vital to Moscow, such as Europe and the Middle East. Moscow's de facto ally, China, was battered but standing, an arrangement attractive to a Russia that remained concerned about

²⁶⁰ Jonah Blank, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Angel Rabasa, and Bonny Lin, *Look East, Cross Black Waters: India's Interest in Southeast Asia*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1021-AF, 2015.

becoming too definitively Beijing's junior partner. The U.S.-led blockade had made China more reliant on Russian energy and resources, and China's reprioritization of resources toward preparing for a resumption of the conflict reduced its ability to displace Russia's traditional security role in Central Asia or compete with Russia for military equipment sales. Moreover, China's voracious appetite for military equipment after 2025 provides an expanded market for Russian exports, including upgraded Su-35 fighters and air defense systems.²⁶¹

As a result, Russia saw little need to modify its comprehensive strategic partnership with China. It sought, instead, to take opportunistic advantage of the bilateral U.S.-China clash to enhance its own sphere of influence in post-Soviet Eurasia. Russia also sought to take advantage of the vacuum left in the Middle East when the U.S. focus pivoted to East Asia, with Moscow attempting to position itself as a key security partner and transactional arms supplier for traditional U.S. partners that felt neglected by the shift.

Risk of Conflict Recurrence

The risk of conflict recurrence immediately after the cease-fire was relatively high and remained so throughout the remainder of the 2020s before culminating in a second war in 2029.²⁶² Four factors drove this risk. First, Taiwan and China were unable to, and ultimately uninterested in, resolving the underlying sources of the conflict through a peace treaty or postwar negotiations. Moreover, new issues—such as the fate of the formerly Taiwanese residents of the offshore and Penghu Islands and the presence of U.S. troops on Taiwan—added additional sources of friction between Beijing and Taipei.

Second, domestic politics in both Taiwan and China supported policies that made a resumption of hostilities likely. The Taiwanese general population grew increasingly pro-independence, antagonized by the immense damage that China inflicted on them during the war and by Beijing's refusal to respect Taiwanese autonomy in its aftermath. On the mainland, the PRC's long-standing commitment to a nationalistic program of territorial recovery combined with the failure to achieve this goal in the 2025 war led to increasing popular hawkishness.

²⁶¹ For example, Russia has sold Su-35 fighter jets to China (Zhao Lei, "Russian Jet Fighters to Enhance the PLA," *China Daily*, December 3, 2015; "China, Russia to Increase Capabilities to Jointly Deal with Security Threats: Chinese Defense Minister," Xinhua, April 26, 2019).

²⁶² For a discussion of the risk of conflict recurrence following an indecisive war, see Suzanne Werner and Amy Yuen, "Making and Keeping Peace," *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 2, Spring 2005; Virginia Page Fortna, *Peacetime: Cease-Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 8, 12. For the additional risk when the conflict concerns territory, see Stephen L. Quackenbush, "Territorial Issues and Recurrent Conflict," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2010; Shoko Kohama, "Territorial Acquisition, Commitment, and Recurrent War," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2018; and John A. Vasquez, "The Probability of War, 1816–1992," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 1, March 2004. There is no comprehensive settlement that ends the war. For a discussion of agreement terms, such as verification measures, that can reduce the risk of conflict recurrence, see Virginia Page Fortna, "Scraps of Paper? Agreements and the Durability of Peace," *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 2, Spring 2003; and Fortna, 2004, p. 8.

China's leaders believed that Taiwanese success in achieving de jure independence would be an existential threat to the CCP's domestic hold on power. This, in turn, hypersensitized the mainland to shifts in Taiwan's domestic politics.

Third, China believed that its rapid, intensive military rebuilding program could enable it to win a repeat Taiwan scenario by the late 2020s, but that it would be costly to maintain this position indefinitely. By 2029, the PLA assessed itself as having a relatively high probability of successfully seizing Taiwan through a precipitous invasion. However, this rearmament and high state of readiness came at the expense of many of its BRI investments, broader efforts to expand China's global reach, and some domestic spending. Furthermore, China's international position seemed to have fallen to the worst of both worlds: branded as an aggressor because of its attack on Taiwan but not sufficiently powerful to have successfully coerced Taiwan to change its course. U.S. containment efforts following the war continued to impose residual costs on the Chinese economy and slow down its rebuilding efforts. Taken together, these trends convinced Beijing that the Taiwan problem had festered long enough and that efforts to ensure its international and domestic position could not move forward until the problem had been resolved definitively in its favor.

Fourth, both the United States and China worried that the other might seize a temporary operational advantage by resuming the conflict with little warning. Postwar analysis in both states assessed that China's reluctance to launch a widespread attack against U.S. forces across the Western Pacific at the beginning of the last war was a major misstep, allowing the United States the opportunity and time required to intervene in force. U.S. analysts viewed China's rearmament program as clearly directed toward a resumption of the Taiwan conflict in the near term, and China believed that the United States' force posture in the INDOPACOM AOR indicated its ongoing preparations for launching a preemptive war against China. These heightened threat perceptions generated an additional source of crisis instability.²⁶³

In conjunction, these factors pushed China to use Taiwanese political developments in late 2028 and early 2029 as a rationale to launch a sudden assault on Taiwan using prepositioned and alerted forces, bringing the uneasy peace in the Western Pacific to an abrupt end. Although a resumption of conflict had been recognized as likely in Taipei, Tokyo, and Washington since the first uneasy days following the cease-fire, its precise timing still came as an operational surprise.

International Order

The 2025 war for Taiwan and the tense period that followed it led to heightened tensions between the United States and China that, in turn, undermined the functioning of existing international institutions without either state having sufficient leverage to construct alternatives. Each state struggled, largely unsuccessfully, to create coalitions aligned against the other. The United States, for example, lobbied states across the Indo-Pacific to join a countervailing

²⁶³ For a discussion of how high threat perceptions can amplify misperception, see Jervis, 1976.

coalition to balance against China's future aggression, defining the competition as a global clash between democracy and totalitarian autocracy. Relatively few states, however, were willing to commit to an effort that would expose them to an increased risk of war with China—and a loss of trade with China—on behalf of Taiwan. The United States had somewhat more success in pushing for a variety of export controls and sanctions on certain technology and raw material sectors to impede China's rearmament, but participation was confined to close allies. Washington also sought to build on existing free trade agreements in the Pacific to lock China out of a U.S.-centered trade regime. It finally joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and unsuccessfully pushed for special dispensation to allow Taiwan to join even while it was in the process of implementing requisite policy reforms.²⁶⁴

Meanwhile, China attempted to develop a network of states that either viewed China's economic rise and largesse as essential to their own future development or saw the West's promotion of democratic institutions and values as dangerous for their own regime security. However, few states besides Russia were willing to openly support such an effort—partly because of China's increasingly insular focus on Taiwan and reduction in BRI and other investments.

A key outcome of these efforts in both Beijing and Washington was to create a more bipolar system that led to rising dysfunction in many international forums. The UN, for example, was increasingly gridlocked, both in the UN Security Council and in other bodies. Similar troubles plagued the interwar WTO, International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Although the effectiveness of these bodies declined, there were few alternatives. China's crash campaign to rebuild its military resulted in a diminution of its investments in alternatives to traditional U.S.-led international institutions. In addition, the economic shock caused by the war and the decline in Chinese overseas investment aggravated socioeconomic tensions in many states. Existing international organizations were increasingly seen as being in need of reform.

Risk of Conflict Involving Other Great Powers

The aftermath of the 2025 war had important implications for the risk of conflict between other great powers. The military resources and strategic attention that the United States focused on the Western Pacific came at the expense of its posture in the Middle East and in Europe. In particular, the United States becomes less interested in or capable of sustaining a major forward presence in Europe. The withdrawal of key air and naval capabilities and reductions in investments in infrastructure and exercises led to a clear reduction in Russian perceptions of threat from the United States and NATO. Although perceived reduction in pressure from the

²⁶⁴ Taiwan has considered joining the successor to the Trans-Pacific Partnership in the past but has faced both domestic and international impediments to doing so (Cheng Ting-Fang, "Taiwan Envoy to Ask Japan to Back Island's Bid for TPP Membership," *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 9, 2018).

United States left Russia free to act more assertively toward other states in what it perceived as its sphere of influence—notably Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—this lack of pressure also led to a reduction in tensions between Russia and NATO member states, where Russia did not harbor similar designs.²⁶⁵ European NATO members did increase their military spending in recognition of the United States’ strategic reorientation, but these increases were not sufficient to threaten Russian security or concentrated in capabilities, such as long-range precision strike, that were of the greatest concern to Moscow. Furthermore, European NATO members sought to use a variety of tools to lower tensions with Russia through what some observers took to calling “Ostpolitik 2.0.” Although the United States initially had hoped to punish Russia for circumventing its distant blockade of China and contributing to China’s rapid interwar rearmament, it acquiesced to European efforts at rapprochement as the price of its own focus on East Asia.

Implications for the Joint Force in This Postwar Setting

This postwar setting would not feel much like a return to peace. With the emergence of a frozen conflict, the joint force would be asked to remain ready for a sudden return to conflict. Activities in the region, such as security cooperation, would likely be focused on the possibility of another Taiwan War. This would include increased security cooperation with those countries seen as most likely to fight together in a future war: Taiwan, Japan, and Australia. At the same time, the joint force would reduce security cooperation with countries seeking to distance themselves from the United States, such as the Philippines. In this tense environment, the joint force would be very attentive to how exercises, deployments, and other activities intended to prepare for the possibility of another war could inadvertently heighten Chinese perceptions of U.S. offensive intent.

Given its changing relationship with South Korea, the United States might reposition forces out of that country and reduce emphasis on preparations for a contingency on the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. decision to focus on the Indo-Pacific would reduce demands for Air Force forces in Europe, the Middle East, and other regions.

²⁶⁵ In recent years, Russia’s key moments of aggression in Ukraine (2014) and Georgia (2008) coincided more closely with Russian perceptions of strategic threat from the West (potential NATO membership for Georgia, a Ukraine with a pro-Western government more closely integrated with the EU) than they did with moments of NATO weakness or lack of resolve. Furthermore, Russia makes a clear distinction in its strategic thinking between NATO members and post-Soviet Eurasian states that it considers within its sphere of influence. This being the case, we assess that the risk of conflict between Russia and NATO states would likely decline. For a discussion of Russian perceptions of U.S. posture in Europe, see Frederick et al., 2017. For a discussion of the ways in which the presence of in-country U.S. forces can prompt low-level military disputes, see Bryan Frederick, Stephen Watts, Matthew Lane, Abby Doll, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Meagan L. Smith, *Understanding the Deterrent Impact of U.S. Overseas Forces*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2533-A, 2020; and Angela O’Mahony, Miranda Priebe, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh, Matthew Lane, Trevor Johnston, Thomas S. Szayna, Jakub P. Hlavka, Stephen Watts, and Matthew Povlock, *U.S. Presence and the Incidence of Conflict*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1906-A, 2018.

Preparing for another conflict over Taiwan would likely be the focus of INDOPACOM contingency planning and would be a top priority in other combatant command and national decisionmaking processes as well. With another war looming, the joint force would be focused not only on rebuilding but also on doing so more rapidly than China. This would not simply mean replacing systems. Rather, the joint force would be considering concepts and tactics that could help it overcome shortcomings revealed in the previous war. Because China would also be adapting as it rearms, this postwar period would be a time of intense focus on near-term innovation.

5. War Caused by Russian Misperception Ends in Restrictions on Military Forces in Northeastern Europe

NOTE: This scenario was written in 2020, before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has not been subsequently updated. As such, the sections of this scenario on the road to war and the prosecution of the conflict describe a world that no longer exists. The Russian military has been substantially degraded in Ukraine and, as a result, likely lacks the capabilities to execute some of the actions ascribed to them in this scenario. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has revealed substantial weaknesses in Russian military capabilities that, while not central to the story told in this scenario, would have altered how we would have assessed some Russian actions if we had known them at the time of our writing. NATO as an alliance has also substantially evolved as a result of the war in Ukraine, not least through the pending additions of Finland and Sweden. As an operational account of how a near-future war between NATO and Russia would likely play out, this scenario can be substantially discounted.

Despite these limitations, we have decided to keep this scenario in the report for two main reasons. First, the use of nuclear signaling, and ultimately nuclear weapons, in the scenario remains a plausible route that a future NATO-Russia conflict could travel, and the nuclear capabilities involved on either side have not been substantially altered by the Ukraine war, as of this writing. Second, the bulk of the analysis in this chapter focuses on what comes after a Russia-NATO war, rather than during one. However a war between Russia and NATO that results in nuclear use were to unfold operationally, the issues it would raise in the aftermath could be similar to those we describe here. Therefore, this scenario may continue to provide value for ongoing debates even as the strategic setting has evolved substantially due to the war in Ukraine.

In 2027, after an escalating spiral of tensions between Russia and Lithuania, Russia imposed a de facto no-fly zone over parts of Poland and Lithuania and began mobilizing ground forces. In response, NATO prepared local ground, naval, and air forces to respond, while Lithuania blocked the transit of Russian forces to Kaliningrad. Russia misinterpreted these actions as evidence that NATO intended to isolate and possibly attack Kaliningrad. Russia therefore launched a preemptive strike against military forces in Poland and Lithuania. Over the course of two to three months, NATO and Russia engaged in an expanding set of strikes against NATO countries, the Russian mainland, and as far away as Syria.

As the conflict continued, Russian theater forces sustained significant damage and the Kremlin was increasingly concerned about expanding U.S. or NATO strikes into the Russian mainland. As Russia's conventional forces were destroyed and its long-range precision strike capabilities depleted, it first threatened, and then employed, tactical nuclear strikes on four

NATO allies in Europe (the UK, Poland, Lithuania, and Germany) to halt the conflict as quickly as possible. The United States, which previously had been engaging military targets inside mainland Russia, responded by using a single tactical nuclear weapon against a Russian heavy bomber base in the high north. At this, both sides agreed to an immediate cease-fire as the possibility of a strategic nuclear exchange appeared imminent.

In the post-conflict period, Russia agreed to demilitarize Kaliningrad and a 50-km zone within Russia near the Baltics. NATO agreed that no foreign military forces would be stationed in Poland or the Baltics. In the postwar period, significant damage to the U.S.-German relationship occurred; the German public blamed U.S. targeting for provoking Russian nuclear strikes on Germany. Poland took steps to construct its own nuclear program as a result of feeling betrayed by the terms of the peace settlement. Russia, having been the first country to use nuclear weapons in over 75 years, was seen as a destabilizing actor after the conflict. Unfortunately, the United States also incurred losses to its reputation, even among NATO allies, because of its nuclear use and what were perceived to be escalatory operational choices. The Russian military and economy were hobbled as a result of this war, and Russia redoubled its efforts to integrate its economy with China to offset these losses. The war's greatest beneficiary was China. Although the United States and Russia suffered substantial military losses, China took advantage of the diplomatic fissures that resulted. China's growing clout further stressed the traditional U.S.-led international system that already saw strain on key pillars, such as the nuclear use taboo and nonproliferation.

This scenario challenges two common assumptions about a war with Russia. First, many Russian war narratives start with Russia preemptively launching an attack at a time of its choosing. In ours, we seek to offer a plausible narrative for Russian initiation resulting from misperception about NATO activities. Relatedly, the scenario explores how Russia's assumptions about the course of an air war with NATO would cause Moscow to escalate during the conflict and miss signals that NATO is seeking to deescalate. Second, we consider the possibility of Russia initiating a war with widespread air and missile strikes rather than ground operations in northeastern Europe. We also explore the implications of alliance discord about escalation decisions and the aftermath of a limited nuclear strike campaign in Europe.

We first provide a chronological narrative of key events during the conflict, followed by more-detailed discussions of key issues drawn from the analytical framework developed in Chapter 2. The third section provides a brief overview of the postwar period and the fourth explores strategic outcomes and implications for the joint force.

Conflict Narrative

This section describes the conflict scenario chronologically. In it, we describe the tensions that preceded the conflict, how the war started, and how the war unfolded and ultimately ended after a nonstrategic nuclear exchange.

Growing Tensions

At the start of 2027, mistrust was at an all-time high between the United States and Russia. All arms control agreements between the United States and Russia had collapsed—the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (2007), Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (2019), Open Skies Treaty (2020), and New Start.²⁶⁶ Military-to-military communications and crisis resolution channels between NATO and Russia were effectively frozen, with no deconfliction hotlines and little political bilateral or multilateral engagement.

In the decade leading up to the war, NATO had increased its military capabilities in Eastern Europe to deter Russian aggression against a member state.²⁶⁷ Moscow believed that the cumulative effects of these improvements would be to improve NATO's offensive capabilities and that these developments were an indication that NATO was attempting to reconstitute the ability to wage large-scale conflict against Russia and threaten Kaliningrad or even western Russia (see Figure 5.1 for context).²⁶⁸ After the United States withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, Russian officials assumed that the United States would build on these gains by deploying new missiles to the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East to contain Russia.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ Linton F. Brooks, "The End of Arms Control?" *Daedalus*, Vol. 149, No. 2, 2020. For more on U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and on Russia's "suspension" of its commitments under the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, see U.S. Department of Defense, "DOD Statement on Open Skies Treaty Withdrawal," press release, May 21, 2020; and Michael R. Pompeo, "U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019," U.S. Department of State, press statement, August 2, 2019.

²⁶⁷ Since 2016, NATO has added forces in Europe as part of the European Defense Initiative, such as the enhanced forward presence (eFP) battalions; C2 modifications, such as the creation of Multinational Division–North and other rotational brigade headquarters that could support combat operation in northeastern Europe; enhancements to theater reception and deployment routes from Western Europe to the Baltics; and the repositioning of U.S. troops from Germany to Poland (at Bydgoszcz and Torun) beginning in 2020. See John Andreas Olsen, "Understanding NATO," *RUSI Journal*, 2020; and Matthew Lee, "Pompeo Inks Deal to Support More US Troops in Poland," Associated Press, August 15, 2020.

²⁶⁸ In the recent past, Russian officials have said that post-2016 NATO force posture improvements are proof that NATO is increasing its combat potential and operationalizing its containment strategy against Russia. "Russia's Envoy to NATO: Weapons Control Regime in Europe Is Dead," *InSerbia News*, April 1, 2016.

²⁶⁹ "US May Deploy Intermediate- and Shorter-Range Missiles in Europe, Says Russian Diplomat," TASS, May 18, 2020; "The Shadow of the Untimely Deceased INF Treaty Surrounds Russia," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 39, October 25, 2019.

Figure 5.1. Map of Eastern Europe



SOURCE: Adapted from United Nations, *Cartographic Section*, undated.

Russia had also been improving military capabilities in its western region as part of a comprehensive defense reform program. Russia overhauled C2 in the area, consolidated units and improved readiness of air, army, and naval units. Russia had procured fighter aircraft and electronic warfare capabilities, fielded new theater strike capabilities, and begun to field new hypersonic missiles at a small but steady rate.²⁷⁰ Russia had also gained extensive operational experience through conventional operations in Syria, proxy operations in Ukraine and Libya, and in online disinformation campaigns in the United States and Europe for the past decade. In spite of its posture and readiness enhancements, Russia worried that the regional military balance was, on net, shifting slowly in NATO's favor.²⁷¹

NATO, however, saw regional trends differently. It assessed that Russian regional power projection was superior in the Baltics and near Kaliningrad and had observed with concern that the Russian military was adding to its advantages. For example, NATO observed that Russia made improvements to its forces in western Russia and the Arctic, and increased the number of

²⁷⁰ "Russia's Baltic Fleet to Receive Ships with Kalibr Missiles and Panstir Systems," TASS, May 18, 2020.

²⁷¹ Clint Reach, Vikram Kilambi, and Mark Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4235-OSD, 2020.

combat units in Kaliningrad.²⁷² By 2027, Russia had improved its regional C2 links among Kaliningrad, the Western Military District headquarters, and Belarus, and it had tested these C2 links regularly via command post exercises. Western Military District forces frequently conducted snap exercises near the Kaliningrad border with Lithuania and Poland. Russian offensive theater strike systems in the air, sea, and ground could hold NATO assets at risk, and the long range of its strategic SAMs from Kaliningrad extended over NATO territory, creating several access problems in the event of a crisis. Both sides were now locked into a cycle of readiness improvements and suspicions and were interpreting the intention behind each other's activities as aggressive.

In 2027, NATO concluded Defender-2027, a large exercise that tested the deployment of over 20,000 U.S. forces into Europe and 4,000 pieces of military equipment to the theater. Furthermore, the United States planned to permanently base one battalion of intermediate-range ground-based missile systems in Europe. The United States also announced its intention to leave a battalion of these intermediate-range missiles behind after Defender-2027 concluded.²⁷³ Noting that Russia already had deployed intermediate-range ground-based missiles after the INF Treaty collapsed, the United States believed that these deployments would not fundamentally alter the balance of forces; if anything, the United States believed its deployments restored parity to a capability that was lacking.²⁷⁴ These U.S. weapons were to be temporarily stored in Germany until deployed to western Poland. Russia believed that this move would violate the Russia-NATO Founding Act, which placed limits on substantial combat forces along Russia's borders.²⁷⁵

²⁷² Russia had also installed its newest over-the-horizon missile, stealth warning radar, and electronic warfare capabilities in Kaliningrad. Beginning in 2019, Russia also bolstered its longest-range artillery and multiple rocket launchers, which outranged U.S. or NATO systems of the same class. In 2018, Russia started refurbishing weapons storage in Kaliningrad and sent an additional motorized rifle division there after 2020. Iskandr systems in the area are capable of firing SRBMs and intermediate-range cruise missiles, such as the SSC-7 and SSC-8 ground-launched cruise missiles. Other artillery in the area include the Tornado-S system, with a range of up to 120 km (Roger McDermott, "Moscow Enhances Artillery Firepower in Kaliningrad," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 43, April 1, 2020c). The Kontayner over-the-horizon radar can reportedly track cruise and hypersonic missiles of up to 3,200 km away (John Vandiver, "Russia to Base Hypersonic Tracking Radar in the Middle of NATO Turf," *Stars and Stripes*, March 20, 2020; "Military Intelligence, Russia Forming New Division in Kaliningard," *Delfi*.en, February 4, 2020).

²⁷³ The United States plans to field one battalion of PrSMs in Asia by 2023 with a range of 500 km. For the purposes of this scenario, we assume that the United States also deploys one to Europe by 2027. We also assume that the United States deployed other intermediate-range systems, such as the long-range hypersonic weapon (Sebastian Roblin, "U.S. Army Is Bringing Back Land-Based Missiles with a Vengeance in a Post-INF World," *Forbes*, August 7, 2019).

²⁷⁴ Roger McDermott, "Russia's Iskander Missile System and the Collapse of the INF Treaty," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 7, January 22, 2020b; McDermott, 2020a.

²⁷⁵ NATO, *Founding Act: On Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France, Brussels, Belgium, May 27, 1997*.

Escalating Unconventional Conflict in the Baltics

Russian proxy and clandestine forces engaged in an escalating set of cyberattacks against military targets in the Baltics and Poland before and during Defender-2027.²⁷⁶ Russian intelligence forces and their proxies harassed military personnel in Poland and Lithuania, including using small explosives at military facilities and at military and intelligence personnel's off-base homes. NATO countries suspected that Russian proxies, organized and supported by Russian intelligence, were responsible for actions inside Poland and Lithuania.

NATO responded by targeting Russian groups—such as the Internet Research Agency and suspected Russian intelligence front companies—with cyberattacks, network exposures, and exfiltration of data. NATO also released information about clandestine Russian activities in an effort to expose and discredit the Kremlin.

As the actions of the intelligence services grew more brazen on both sides, Polish security forces attempted to apprehend a suspected Russian sabotage unit near a Polish military facility, killing the personnel in the skirmish and detaining a handful of survivors. NATO publicly supported Poland's right to self-defense.

Moscow raised force readiness levels inside Kaliningrad and deployed additional Spetsnaz teams, which are clandestine special forces, to the enclave. These teams launched small UAVs to conduct reconnaissance of local U.S., Polish, and Lithuanian forces. When the Russian UAVs were detected, they were shot down. Local NATO forces went on higher alert and began conducting air and ground reconnaissance missions near Kaliningrad and mainland Russia. Russian air forces also conducted frequent patrols over Kaliningrad and near the Baltic states' airspace, at times entering that airspace to probe responses and desensitize local governments to a “new normal” of heightened activity.²⁷⁷

During a particularly aggressive airspace incursion several kilometers into Lithuania along the Kaliningrad border, a Russian pilot did not leave the airspace after repeated warnings. Lithuanian air forces shot down the Russian aircraft, and the pilot was killed. Local NATO forces and eFP groups raised readiness levels, and the U.S. Army Fifth Corps, created in May 2020 to better support C2 during a crisis in Europe, was given additional authorities and entered a restricted communications status to address the emerging crisis.²⁷⁸ Russia, observing this unusual move toward a wartime C2 posture and the heightened readiness of NATO units in the Baltics and Poland, assessed that the risk of war was growing.

Moscow announced a total airspace closure over Kaliningrad, including Polish and Lithuanian airspace within a 100-km range of its borders and international waters off

²⁷⁶ Patrick Tucker, “Russian Trolls Are Hammering Away at NATO's Presence in Lithuania,” *Defense One*, December 3, 2019.

²⁷⁷ “NATO Interception of Russian Planes in Baltics Rises,” UPI, January 11, 2019.

²⁷⁸ U.S. Army, “Army Announces Activation of Additional Corps Headquarters,” February 11, 2020.

Kaliningrad's coast.²⁷⁹ Russia then conducted fighter CAPs over Kaliningrad and the Baltic Sea and tracked NATO aircraft with ground-based IADS radars. The Kremlin raised the Russian Baltic Fleet's readiness and some ships deployed to sea, raising concerns among neighbors that Russia had mined the approaches to Kaliningrad.

Poland and Lithuania called an emergency meeting of NATO and received an Article IV statement of support from the alliance to convey NATO's support for Poland's and Lithuania's rights to self-defense. NATO was unwilling to accept de facto Russian closure of NATO airspace, citing Polish and Lithuanian national sovereignty, and readied air forces in Germany, Poland, the UK, and Norway for sorties designed to fly through the parts of Lithuania and Poland under Russian SAM coverage. Additional USAF assets from the continental United States (CONUS) deployed to Europe over the course of two to three weeks, contributing to Russian fears of war and worsening correlation of forces in the air domain. At this point in time, NATO airpower, including global U.S. assets, outnumbered Russian aircraft by a ratio of five to one.²⁸⁰ NATO navies in the Baltic Sea deployed surface ships and moved off the coast of Kaliningrad to monitor the airspace.

Diplomatic communications began between the foreign Ministries of Russia, Poland, Lithuania, United States, and Germany as governments attempted to deescalate the crisis. Russia, observing NATO's increases in military readiness and posture, concluded after some internal debate that the diplomatic efforts were disingenuous.²⁸¹ The Russian military prepared for war, raising the alert status of its forces in Kaliningrad and permanently ready military units in the Western and Southern Military Districts—as well as the Joint Strategic Command Northern Fleet.

NATO observed Russian military preparations and SACEUR ordered several measures in response. To deter Russia from any additional violations of NATO airspace during a time of increasing tensions, NATO fighters increased the number of CAPs in the region. Naval readiness drills occurred in the Baltic Sea. NATO ordered eFP rotational units in the Baltics to a higher readiness level, recalled them to garrison, set restricted communications, and began planning for a road march to the Suwalki area.

For operational security reasons, C2 activity for regional NATO forces in northeastern Europe shifted to a restricted communication setting. In Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, and Italy, combat equipment from Army prepositioned stock (APS) sites were brought to

²⁷⁹ Missile Defense Project, "S-400 Triumph," *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 15, 2018b.

²⁸⁰ Scott Boston, Michael Johnson, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Yvonne K. Crane, *Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, RR-2402, 2018.

²⁸¹ It was rumored that the 2014 decision to annex Crimea was opposed by a few key Kremlin advisers, but other hawkish voices swayed the Russian president (Tor Bukkvoll, "Why Putin Went to War: Ideology, Interests and Decisionmaking in the Russian Use of Force in Crimea and Donbas," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2016).

a higher level of readiness as a precaution.²⁸² To monitor the arrival of Russian forces, small numbers of NATO special forces moved toward the Lithuanian and Belarusian borders.

Russian intelligence detected readiness increases at key NATO military facilities. Russian decisionmakers correctly assumed that NATO was preparing to contest Russian airspace closures, and they believed that this would include attacking air defense sites in Kaliningrad. NATO suspected that Russian ground, air, and sea transports were reinforcing Kaliningrad with a mixture of offensive and defensive weaponry and supplies. Lithuania closed its border with Belarus and cut off the rail and road routes through its territory linking Kaliningrad to Belarus and the rest of Russia.²⁸³

On observing this activity, the Russian General Staff concluded that these steps were indications that NATO was prepared, and possibly would attempt, to isolate Kaliningrad from Russia.²⁸⁴ Russian diplomats and military leaders demanded that NATO withdraw its forces from positions that threatened Kaliningrad's link to Russia (via Belarus), reopen ground and rail supply lines, and return all forces in Lithuania to their home garrisons. NATO rejected the Russian demand until Russia recanted its airspace closure declaration.

With tensions rising, SACEUR halted the movement of U.S. forces in the theater back to CONUS after the conclusion of Defender-2027—approximately 20,000 personnel and 4,000 pieces of armored equipment at five staging locations in Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands.²⁸⁵ The temporary increase in NATO forces resulting from Defender-2027, recall of air forces from other combatant commands, and changes in NATO C2 and elevated readiness at APS locations led Russia to believe that the correlation of forces was shifting against Russia. Russian strategists saw NATO's diplomatic rejection as the final indicator that NATO was prepared to conduct large-scale combat operations.

²⁸² APS is prepositioned combat equipment stationed abroad in climate-controlled facilities and kept to a high readiness standard. As needed, soldiers are flown rapidly to an area to use the equipment during a crisis or conflict. The APS-2 is based in Europe and each facility is designed to house one combat brigade worth of equipment. U.S. Army Europe, "Fact Sheet: Army Prepositioned Stocks," June 5, 2020; Elliott Page, "Coleman Barracks Army Prepositioned Stock Site DEFENDER-Europe 20 Movement," U.S. Army, February 4, 2020; U.S. Army Europe, "Army Prepositioned Stock—Europe," U.S. Army, August 3, 2017.

²⁸³ Arrangements allow Russia to transport military forces through Lithuanian territory to reach Kaliningrad. For context, see Benas Gerdžiūnas, "Russia's Military Corridor in Lithuania That Never Was," Lithuanian Radio and Television, February 19, 2020; and Rikard Jozwiak, "Potential EU Budget Cut Threatens Kaliningrad Transit," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 20, 2020.

²⁸⁴ Observations come from prepositioned Spetsnaz forces, intelligence personnel, and sympathetic civilians who are blending in and operating covertly in Lithuania and Poland.

²⁸⁵ U.S. Army Europe, "Defense Europe Key Facts," infographic, undated.

Conventional Conflict Begins

Determined not to allow NATO to initiate what could be a devastating first strike, Russian Aerospace Forces began offensive operations against NATO forces in Lithuania and Poland.²⁸⁶ They covertly deployed Spetsnaz reconnaissance teams in Lithuania to call in coordinates for strikes by ground fires.²⁸⁷ Over the course of 48 hours, the Russian military launched limited strikes from the air and ground from Kaliningrad and western Russia against NATO ground forces converging in Lithuania and Poland. These NATO forces took heavy losses; they had little to no organic air defenses with them, and their only active defenses were from NATO CAPs, which had to navigate through a layered Russian IADS.²⁸⁸ NATO leadership and populations in key states were united in their anger at Russian attacks. Within a day of the first Russian strike, the NAC convened and unanimously invoked Article V.

Russia bypassed NATO's military leadership and initiated a call with the White House to negotiate a cease-fire directly. To the Kremlin's surprise, its offer was rejected by the White House, which would not agree to a cease-fire in the face of a Russian attack that had created so many casualties. Observing this diplomatic failure and the escalating conflict, German and French leaders offered to mediate.

The United States ordered retaliatory strikes on Russian SS-26 units and fighter aircraft in Kaliningrad. Losses of U.S. and NATO fourth- and fifth-generation fighters were substantial during this period as they pressed into range of Russian SAMs and electronic warfare assets to carry out strikes against Russian forces.

Russia aimed to undermine NATO consensus and willingness to respond collectively to this crisis in two ways. First, it would attempt to isolate Lithuania and Poland diplomatically from the rest of NATO. Russia sought to frame the conflict as one involving itself, Lithuania, and Poland. Russia used diplomacy and online disinformation to confuse who initiated the conflict and to frame the conflict as a local problem. Russia initially limited strikes to Polish and Lithuanian territory to encourage this narrative. Second, Russia sought to induce fear and doubt into other members of NATO and parts of the U.S. population regarding Russian willingness to escalate. Russia announced that it would target NATO countries that conducted attacks against Russia or

²⁸⁶ Russian strategists assess that the U.S. way of warfare calls for gaining air superiority early in conflict to inflict serious and irreparable damage on an opponent and suppress the enemy's will to resist (S. G. Chekinov, V. I. Markarov, and V. V. Kochergin, "Achieving and Maintaining Air Superiority (in Aerospace)—A Worthy Place in the Development of Russian Military Theory and Training of Troops (Forces) [Завоеванию И Удержанию Господства В Воздухе (В Воздушно-Космической Сфере)—Достойное Место В Развитии Российской Военной Теории И Подготовке Войск (Сил), *Zvovaniyu i uderzhaniyu gospodstva v vozdukhe (v vozdushno-kosmicheskoi sfere)—dostoinoe mesto v razvitii rossiiskoi voennoi teorii i podgotovke voisk (sil)*," *Military Thought* [Военная мысль, *Voennaia mysl'*], No. 2, February 2017; Konstantin Sivkov, "Heavenly Bastions [Небесные бастионы, *Nebesnyye bastiony*]," *Military Industrial Courier* [Военно-Промышленный Кур'ер, *Voенно-Promyshlenny Kur'yer*], No. 6, February 18, 2019).

²⁸⁷ "Syria Conflict: Body of Russian 'Hero' Flown Home," BBC, April 26, 2016.

²⁸⁸ Shlapak and Johnson, 2016.

Russian forces or states that hosted foreign forces launching such attacks. Russian leaders hoped this announcement would lead some NATO countries to withdraw support for the operations and refuse access to foreign forces. Privately, Russian diplomats warned European leaders that continued escalation, by the United States in particular, would draw Europe into a larger conflict. These communiques were then leaked to traditionally isolationist or nationalist political factions that seemed like they might be in favor of accepting these terms, making it more difficult for key allies to sustain their contributions. These efforts proved largely unsuccessful in the near term, but they did plant seeds that contributed to greater intra-NATO tensions as the conflict developed.

After the initial Russian air and missile attacks, several Russian BTGs moved into Lithuania from Belarus to link up to Kaliningrad by ground. They quickly engaged NATO forces in the region and established ground lines of communication from Belarus to Kaliningrad. Russian artillery and multiple rocket launchers outranged most NATO assets, making them difficult to neutralize locally. Russian ground-based missile launchers also fired from locations that were more than 100 km inside Belarus or Russia and were highly mobile in heavily forested terrain, making their neutralization difficult. At an emergency session, SACEUR recalled personnel affiliated with the APS units across Europe from their home units and activated the NATO rapid-reaction task force and its deployment north. NATO leadership pledged that their forces would go on high alert.

Expansion of Conventional Strikes Across Europe and NATO Attacks Russian Forces

A small number of NATO nations (including the United States and the UK) were able to quickly launch a punishing counterattack on Russian ground forces in Lithuania and on Russian air forces supporting those ground forces. In an effort to prevent further escalation, NATO confined its strikes to military targets in Kaliningrad and Belarus that were suspected of launching attacks. At this stage, NATO avoided striking bases in mainland Russia and assets that Russia would consider strategic or of high value, such as early warning radars.²⁸⁹

Russia's forces sustained significant damage and losses. Forward-deployed ground force assets and SAMs were at partial mission capability, or loss levels of about 20–30 percent per unit. But Russian forces still maintained their connection to Kaliningrad via a land corridor, supplied with fresh battalions that were staged in Belarus and elsewhere in western Russia.

NATO was not yet planning to strike within Russia but began preparations to conduct such operations if needed. U.S. bombers based out of the UK (Royal Air Force [RAF] Fairford station²⁹⁰), NATO surface ships armed with TLAMs and ASCMs, and fighter aircraft armed with

²⁸⁹ Russia has one site of its Voronezh-DM ballistic missile early warning radars in Kaliningrad. "Russia to Complete Its Missile Warning Radar Network by 2019," TASS, October 4, 2017. Russia also has plans to deploy the Kontayner over-the-horizon radar to Kaliningrad (McDermott, 2020c).

²⁹⁰ 501st Combat Support Wing Public Affairs, "U.S. Air Force B-52s Deploy to Europe," U.S. Air Force, March 15, 2019.

JASSMs and JASSMs–Extended Range (JASSM-ERs) were prepared for operations against Russian targets in Belarus, Lithuania, and Kaliningrad. Russia observed these preparations and saw it as an indication NATO wanted to expand the conflict.

As an additional precaution against the possibility that conflict would expand, NATO altered its naval posture as well. A CSG that had participated in Defender-2027 repositioned to the Western Mediterranean. A second CSG was deployed from Norfolk, Virginia, to be stationed in the northern Atlantic. Finally, a Pacific Fleet CSG was deployed from Japan into international waters outside the range of Russian land-based fires from the Eastern Military District, and Alaska-based U.S. forces went on higher readiness alert.

Having demonstrated NATO’s willingness to respond to Russian aggression and hoping to prevent a wider war, U.S. and NATO leaders approached Moscow to discuss a cease-fire. However, Russian hawks in the national security council and military noted NATO force changes and urged the Russian president to disregard “false” offers of cease-fires. They warned that the correlation of force calculations and combat potential indicated that NATO would soon have the potential to deliver devastating damage to Russian forces.²⁹¹ The president was therefore unwilling to take the risk of ceasing operations and making Russian forces vulnerable to a surprise attack if NATO cease-fire efforts were not sincere.

Conflict Expands to Strikes Across Europe

Fearing a worst-case scenario of a massed NATO aerospace attack on the Russian mainland (as their strategists had predicted for 20 years), Russia used cruise missiles launched from bombers and surface ships along with ground-based missiles to attack NATO air bases, as well as other air and sea ports before these locations could be used to launch missions against Russia or accept more forces into theater.²⁹² This included air bases in Poland, Lithuania, and Estonia; it also included large NATO air bases throughout Europe, such as Ramstein and Spangdahlem air bases in Germany and RAF Mildenhall in the UK. Russia’s goals were to neutralize facilities that based fifth-generation fighter aircraft, bombers, or high-value assets (such as NATO refueling aircraft).²⁹³ Russia also attacked Aegis Ashore locations in Poland and Romania, SPY missile defense radars in Turkey, and the GLOBUS early warning radar in Norway.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Reach, Kilambi, and Cozad, 2020.

²⁹² David Johnson, *Russia’s Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds*, Livermore, Calif.: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory Center for Global Security Research, Livermore Papers on Global Security No. 3, February 2018.

²⁹³ Chekinov, Markarov, and Kochergin, 2017.

²⁹⁴ Russia targeted these sites early for three main reasons: Russia has long assumed that the sites can be quickly reconfigured to launch land-attack cruise missiles, the radars can look well inside Russian airspace, and Russia has some concerns that ballistic missile defense interceptors could neutralize Russian ballistic missiles (“US Fails to Prove Russia ‘Breached’ INF, Security Chief Says,” TASS, August 6, 2019; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, “INF Treaty: Refuting Russian Allegations of U.S. Noncompliance with the INF Treaty,” Washington, D.C., fact sheet, December 8, 2017).

Russian long-range aviation (LRA) bombers and navy ships and the Iskandr systems all launched fires in support of this plan.²⁹⁵ NATO sustained damage at airfields and ports that were crucial for reception, particularly where combat equipment was being staged to return home to CONUS after the exercise. Significant casualties and equipment losses were reported, but because NATO had taken measures to disperse aircraft and other equipment as hostilities began, the Russian attacks were not as damaging to NATO airpower as Russia had hoped.

Russia also attempted to disable power nodes using cyberattacks but met with limited success.²⁹⁶ Russia conducted nonkinetic anti-satellite and other counterspace operations to temporarily disable communication and other U.S. space-based satellites in LEO.²⁹⁷ Russia also used kinetic counterspace systems, including co-orbital hunter-killer satellites and DA-ASAT weapons in LEO.²⁹⁸

In retaliation, NATO navies and air forces first targeted the Russian Baltic Fleet, which lost most of its strength.²⁹⁹ NATO then targeted the Kaliningrad IADS network and the Kontayner over-the-horizon radar system. NATO fighters were generally able to outperform Russian fighters in engagements over the Baltics, Poland, and Belarus, but the attrition of Russian mobile SAMs was a slow process, which greatly limited the ability of NATO fourth-generation aircraft to operate close to Russian forces without suffering considerable losses. NATO then began using cruise missiles and other long-range fires on Russian staging areas in Belarus and tactical aviation bases inside mainland Russia that were launching raids on NATO forces in the Baltics. With the loss of over-the-horizon radar coverage, Russian warning systems underperformed.

Over the course of the following three weeks, the fight continued in Lithuania on the ground, and Germany, the UK, Norway, Italy, and Turkey experienced Russian strikes on air bases and some ports. Disruptions at air bases, such as runway cratering or fuel storage issues, were able to be overcome within days or a week as alternative locations were brought online (albeit with reduced sortie rates). Ransomware and other attacks on financial centers and banks also caused economic disruption across the United States and Europe. NATO also conducted limited

²⁹⁵ Russian LRA bombers launched Kh-101 land-attack cruise missiles (with ranges of 4,000 km) and Kh-555 air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) (with ranges of 2,000 km), Russian navy ships fired SS-N-30A Kalibr Land Attack Cruise Missiles, and the Iskandr system launched SS-26 SRBMs, SSC-7, and SSC-8 GLCMs.

²⁹⁶ Theresa Hitchens, "Russia Builds New Co-Orbital Satellite: SWF, CSIS Say," *Breaking Defense*, April 4, 2019; U.S. Space Command Public Affairs, "Russia Tests Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite Missile," Washington, D.C., April 15, 2020.

²⁹⁷ Russia is expected to continue to develop such capabilities, which are already reported to exist (Harrison et al., 2020; Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019a).

²⁹⁸ Moscow continues to develop these capabilities, which may be operationally mature in this scenario's time frame (Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Tests an Anti-Satellite Weapon, U.S. Officials Say," *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2020; U.S. Space Command Public Affairs, 2020).

²⁹⁹ The Baltic Fleet is one of Russia's weakest fleets, known to have aging equipment and, periodically, significant command problems relating to dismissal, most recently in 2016 (Steven Horrell, "Baltic Fleet Leadership Purges and Outlook," *#FutureNATO*, July 22, 2016).

offensive cyberattacks against Russia, primarily against military networks associated with its IADS and ground C2 but also against networks linked to ongoing attacks on NATO financial and logistical systems. NATO's ability to disrupt these systems had declined after the first wave of attacks as Russia repaired vulnerabilities that had allowed NATO countries to access these systems.

NATO's use of a large number of distributed airfields and investments in air base hardening and resilience meant that Russian air strikes did not degrade NATO airpower as much as planned, despite both heavy expenditure of Russian conventional precision-guided munitions (PGMs) and losses that did occur in NATO frontline aviation. NATO's redundant basing and logistics options also reduced the effects of Russia's infrastructure attacks. U.S. forces were still able to arrive in the theater and proceed through the joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration process, albeit at reduced efficiency. NATO regenerated forces after Russia's theaterwide attack, completing the process of moving air forces to Europe from CONUS and other theaters over four to six weeks, during which first-line ground units from Western European states and U.S. forces using prepositioned equipment sets in Germany arrived in Poland along with the first elements of U.S. heavy forces being sealifted from the United States.

As Russian air defense losses in Kaliningrad mounted, Russian planners concluded that it would not be much longer before the Kaliningrad IADS network was completely inoperable, given the rate of attrition and lack of reinforcements from the Russian interior.³⁰⁰

U.S. naval forces in the Mediterranean attacked the Russian air base at Khmeimim, Syria, to prevent Russian aircraft from harassing or threatening NATO assets heading toward the Black Sea region or near Italy. Russian defenses and fighter aircraft at this base had been drawn down since their 2016 peak levels and could not withstand the assaults. The U.S. goal in doing this was to show Russia that the costs of sustaining this conflict would be high and would grow if Russia did not halt conflict immediately. However, the operations in Syria convinced Russia that U.S. war aims were expanding.

Russia Threatens Nuclear Use

Before the war, some analysts had assessed that Russia would use nuclear threats and signaling or even employ nuclear weapons early in a conflict to achieve a prompt victory.³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ A. N. Kovalchuk and Y. I. Muskkov, "Indicators of the Effectiveness of Aerospace Defense, Ways of Determining and Ensuring Their Criterion Values [Показатели эффективности воздушно-космической обороны, пути определения и обеспечения их критериальных значений, Pokazateli effektivnosti vozdushno-kosmicheskoi oborony, puti opredelaniya i obespecheniya ikh kriterialnykh znacheniy]," *Military Thought [Военная мысль, Voyennaya mysl']*, September 2010; Sivkov, 2019.

³⁰¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, D.C., February 2, 2018; Mark B. Schneider, "Russian Nuclear 'De-Escalation' of Future War," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 37, No. 5, 2018; Matthew Kroenig, *A Strategy for Deterring Russian Nuclear De-Escalation Strikes*, Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, April 2018; Katarzyna Zysk, "Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 163, No. 2,

However, Russian leaders did not engage in explicit nuclear brinkmanship until they perceived the military or political situation as dire and existential.³⁰²

A few weeks into the conflict, Russia had sustained losses and depleted a majority of its conventional long-range precision strike inventory. This made Russia realize that it would not be able to sustain a conventional war much longer at the current pace. Moreover, Moscow feared that the United States and NATO, seeing a weakened Russia, might strike Russian leadership or forces inside Russia (leading to Russia being unable to defend itself) or they might disable and destroy Russia's strategic nuclear forces.³⁰³ The Kremlin decided to threaten to use NSNWs against military facilities used to conduct attacks on the Russian homeland. By being specific and limited, Russia sought to both lend credibility to the threat and avoid provoking a strategic nuclear exchange.

Russian leaders made the threat publicly and then stated that they wished to discuss an immediate cessation of hostilities. Russia hoped this announcement would shock NATO into stopping the conflict.³⁰⁴ To bolster its threat, Russia placed nuclear forces on high alert. The degradation of NATO ISR assets over the course of the conflict, coupled with Russia's possession of many dual-capable systems and unknown wartime launch sites meant that NATO could not determine the scale of Russian NSNW preparations or which launchers were collocated with nuclear warheads.³⁰⁵

NATO military leaders, along with U.S. and UK political leadership, did not see Russian threats as credible. In their view, Russia was bluffing about its willingness to risk nuclear escalation to avoid a humiliating defeat in what had been an ill-conceived war over a secondary

May 2018; Elbridge Colby, *Russia's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine and Its Implications*, Paris, France: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, January 12, 2016.

³⁰² Russian doctrinal publications and military discourse suggest that Russia would start with threats and demonstrations, followed by limited nuclear use. Large-scale use of nuclear weapons would be a means of last resort in regional or large-scale war (Davis et al., 2019; Olga Oliker and Andrey Baklitskiy, "The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian 'De-Escalation': A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem," *War on the Rocks*, February 20, 2018; Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "The Myth of Russia's Lowered Nuclear Threshold," *War on the Rocks*, September 22, 2017).

³⁰³ This matches analysis (e.g., Lieber and Press, 2013) of the circumstances under which a militarily inferior state at risk of a defeat that it fears may have dire outcomes might attempt to use nuclear weapons—or threaten to do so—to balance out conventional asymmetries or terminate a conflict.

³⁰⁴ Russian sources describe increasing the readiness of nuclear forces and collocating launch systems and missile warheads as ways of signaling its willingness to employ nuclear weapons (Kofman et al., 2020).

³⁰⁵ For an overview of Russia's dual-capable systems (such as mobile ground launchers, which are central to its nuclear force) see Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Russian Nuclear Forces, 2020," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 76, No. 2, 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence, Executive Order, Moscow, Russia, June 8, 2020; Amy F. Woolf, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R45861, 2020b; and Kristensen and Korda, 2019c. For an explanation of why it is difficult for analysts to differentiate between conventional and nuclear warheads for dual-capable systems, see James M. Acton, *Is It a Nuke? Why Warhead Ambiguity Can Cause Mischaracterization Pre-Launch*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 9, 2020.

interest. NATO leaders did not consider the possibility that Russian losses were so significant, and the Russian leadership so concerned about its tenuous grip on power, that the Kremlin believed it faced an existential threat.

Rather, NATO leaders saw these threats as a signal that NATO's campaign was effective and that continuing operations in the face of nuclear threats might force Russia to the negotiating table from a position of undeniable military inferiority. They therefore continued NATO attacks on Russia's dual-use missile units. They did not see these attacks as excessively escalatory because the same units were still conducting conventional strikes. Moreover, NATO was still limiting its strikes to Russian systems in Kaliningrad, Lithuania, or the Belarusian and Russian border regions with NATO states, leaving intact the bulk of Russia's longer-range dual-use units, operating from deep within Belarusian and Russian territory. NATO incorporated this point of view into its diplomatic and public talking points, adding that any assets that fired on U.S. or NATO soil would be targeted. Although some thought the Russian threats were a bluff, the United States and the UK in particular reiterated that they would respond in kind to a Russian nuclear strike on NATO soil, which they hoped would serve to deter Russia while maintaining NATO political-military unity.

However, Russia's nuclear threats splintered NATO's political cohesion. Antiwar protests grew, particularly in Germany. Privately, leaders from Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy confided to Washington that they were facing mounting political pressure over popular fears of nuclear war and urged cease-fire negotiations with Russia. To hedge against future loss of access to air bases in Europe and to increase its ability to strike targets in northern Russia, the United States decided to send *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers equipped with TLAMs, accompanied by attack submarines, toward the Barents Sea.

Russian and NATO Use of Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons

NATO's decision to continue offensive operations against Russia's dual-use missile systems degraded Moscow's confidence both in its ability to control escalation and in the reliability of its theater nuclear forces. Russian leaders decided they needed to find an additional way to make their nuclear threats credible, which they hoped would force NATO into terminating the conflict, adopting an operational pause, or at least reducing its attacks on Russia's dual-use forces and air defenses. Believing that a demonstration of Russia's NSNW capability would be less escalatory than an attack on a NATO territory, Russia detonated one tactical nuclear weapon over the Arctic Ocean.³⁰⁶

This demonstrative nuclear strike was a shock to NATO leaders and publics. Some European states believed that it proved Russia's willingness to use nuclear weapons on NATO territory, and reconsidered their participation in the war. Within hours, Italy and Germany announced that they would no longer conduct strikes or allow others to conduct strikes on the Russian mainland

³⁰⁶ On the possible role of demonstrative nuclear use in Russian nuclear doctrine, see Kofman et al., 2020.

from their territory but would continue to provide transit support or reconnaissance flights. Other NATO states—particularly France, the UK, and the United States—believed that the demonstration increased the plausibility of additional Russian nuclear use but feared that terminating the conflict would embolden Russia to use nuclear coercion in the future.

For the next two days, NATO’s political leaders struggled to reach a consensus position on how to respond to Russia’s nuclear demonstration. Although these discussions were ongoing, allied intelligence detected weapons being loaded onto Russian heavy bombers at Ukrainka Air Base in Russia’s Far East and other preparations at nearby naval facilities. Seeing this as an indication that Russia planned to expand the geographic scope of the war in a desperate attempt to avoid defeat, U.S. forces in the Pacific attacked Ukrainka Air Base and Russian naval assets at port in Vladivostok (SSGNs, naval aviation, and IADS networks on the Kamchatka peninsula).

The attacks in the Pacific theater convinced Moscow that the U.S. aims had expanded and that the war was now, under Russian doctrine, a “large-scale war”—the largest echelon of warfare with global aims and in which nuclear weapons could be used to terminate conflict.³⁰⁷ In response, Russia launched conventional attacks on early warning radars and Elmendorf Air Base in Alaska, which it also intended as a signal regarding the impending danger of nuclear war.

Shortly after Russia made this assessment, it identified the three inbound *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers making their way to the Barents Sea. Concerned that these ships (and presumed accompanying submarines) might find and destroy Russian SSBNs and threaten other Russian assets in the North, Moscow ordered them to be struck with four nuclear-armed Tsirkon ASCMs launched from large surface combatants in the Northern Fleet.³⁰⁸ All three ships and one U.S. attack submarine were sunk.

Some U.S. and NATO leaders called for deescalating the conflict to prevent a strategic nuclear exchange, but others believed that the attack on Alaska and destruction of the surface action group demanded a military response. After only brief consultations with allies, the U.S. president ordered CONUS-based U.S. bombers to launch conventional strikes against the Northern Fleet Headquarters (HQ) at Severomorsk. The United States also launched conventional attacks against Engels Air Force Base in southwestern Russia and dispersal airfields that had been supporting conventional Russian LRA strikes on Europe.

Following the U.S. retaliatory strikes, which suggested that Russian efforts to terminate the conflict had failed, Russian leaders believed that only a forceful set of NSNW strikes on

³⁰⁷ Russian conceptions of levels of conflict are explicit in its doctrine, including in Russian Federation, Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, No. Pr.-2976, December 25, 2014.

³⁰⁸ Open-source analysis suggests that three Tsirkon-equipped frigates might enter Russian service by 2025; will likely be distributed across the Pacific, Northern, and other fleets as they become available; and are probably nuclear capable (Roger McDermott, “Russian Navy Prioritizes Tsirkon Hypersonic Missiles,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 83, June 10, 2020d; Edward Geist and Dara Massicot, “Understanding Putin’s Nuclear ‘Superweapons,’” *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2019). Also, the U.S. and British navies resumed surface operations in the Barents Sea in 2020 for the first time in more than three decades (Shawn Snow, “US Navy Surface Ships Enter the Barents Sea for the First Time Since Mid-1980s,” *NavyTimes*, May 4, 2020a).

militarily and symbolically important targets could shock NATO into ending the conflict.³⁰⁹ For this reason, they ordered simultaneous NSNW attacks on five high-value targets across Europe. First, Russia struck targets with salvos of nuclear Kh-32 ALCMs against Powidz and Łask air bases in Poland (which were hosting fourth- and fifth-generation fighter aircraft), local NATO headquarters units outside Šiauliai Air Base in Lithuania,³¹⁰ and Kh-102 ALCMs at RAF Fairford in the UK. The final two targets were Ramstein Air Base and European Command headquarters in Stuttgart—to disrupt NATO air operations, destroy remaining C2 capabilities, and symbolically strike at the heart of the U.S. military commitment to Europe.

Despite NATO defenses, at least one missile reached each target. The strikes destroyed the facilities along with scores of NATO aircraft and large quantities of other equipment, while killing about 34,000 military personnel and civilians, and inflicting 125,000 additional casualties in surrounding areas. Although the blasts generated little local fallout, they did produce electromagnetic pulses that damaged power grids, affecting millions of other citizens.³¹¹

Although NATO understood that Russian nuclear use was possible, it was nevertheless surprised at these strikes. To fulfill its extended deterrence guarantees and to punish Russia for its massive escalation, U.S. forces in Europe intensified conventional attacks on Russian targets identified as potentially responsible for the nuclear attacks, including air bases housing LRA. The U.S. president ordered an SSBN operating in the Arctic to launch a single Trident ballistic missile tipped with low-yield nuclear warheads at a high north Russian LRA deployment base, destroying the LRA bombers there. U.S. leaders assumed that Russian early warning would recognize this as a single launch and not multiple ones and therefore conclude it was not the start of an all-out strategic nuclear exchange. But when their early warning radar systems picked up and tracked the incoming missile, Russian leaders assumed that it carried high-yield payloads.³¹² That the Trident proved to carry NSNWs was of little comfort to Russian leaders, who

³⁰⁹ For a discussion of these concepts as they appear in Russian military thinking, see Kofman et al., 2020.

³¹⁰ These are illustrative air bases that Russia could strike given our assumptions about U.S. wartime posture. For a brief overview of these bases, see Sebastian Sprenger, “NATO Fools Bill for Massive US Combat Depot in Poland,” *DefenseNews*, March 28, 2019; Kyle Cope, “Łask AB Runway Reopens, Increases US, Polish Military Abilities in Region,” U.S. Air Force, September 25, 2019; Allied Air Command Public Affairs Office, “Lithuanian Air Force Air Base at Šiauliai to Host 53rd NATO Detachment,” Washington, D.C.: NATO Allied Air Command, April 15, 2020; and Kyle Rempfer, “US Spy Planes Moving to Southwest England by 2024,” *Air Force Times*, November 20, 2018.

³¹¹ These estimates are only intended to be suggestive; they rely on a range of simplifying assumptions about both the effects of nuclear explosions and their targets. These casualty and damage patterns follow from those reported in National Security Staff Interagency Policy Coordination Subcommittee for Preparedness and Response to Radiological and Nuclear Threats, *Planning Guidance for Response to a Nuclear Detonation*, Washington, D.C., June 2010.

³¹² Russian officials have publicly said that they will not be able to discriminate whether an inbound ballistic missile’s payload is conventional or nuclear (“Russia Will Give Nuclear Response in Case of Ballistic Missile Attack by US Submarines—Russian Foreign Ministry [Россия даст ядерный ответ в случае атаки баллистических ракет подводок США—МИД РФ],” *Interfax-AVN*, April 29, 2020).

interpreted the U.S. decision to attack with submarine-launched ballistic missiles as warning that a strategic nuclear strike could be imminent.³¹³

In Moscow, Washington, and in capitals across Europe, leaders became acutely aware of the imminent risk of a strategic nuclear war that neither side wanted. As tensions between Russia and the United States reached a peak, however, so did tensions within NATO. Allies who had been attacked by Russian nuclear weapons demanded that NATO pursue cease-fire negotiations unconditionally. Facing this loss of alliance unity and the prospect of strategic nuclear war, the United States extended an immediate cease-fire offer to Russia, noting that U.S. combat potential was on the whole still quite capable while Russian forces had sustained several losses to air and naval power. Russian leaders, who were increasingly desperate to terminate the conflict short of strategic nuclear exchange as well, accepted NATO's proposal and declared a cease-fire.

Key Issues in the Conflict Period

U.S. and Russian Diplomatic, Economic, and Messaging Strategies

The U.S. diplomatic and messaging strategy was relatively straightforward: Russia committed a clear act of aggression against a NATO member, and then consistently throughout the conflict pushed to higher and higher levels of escalation. Russian aggression must be defeated to restore international peace and security and to ensure that such aggression is not rewarded, which could pave the way for other states to behave similarly. After the nuclear demonstration, the United States emphasized the irresponsibility of Russian nuclear use and the need to prevent Russia from benefiting from such use. This messaging continued into the postwar period but ultimately was not very successful outside Europe because the United States also used nuclear weapons.

The United States pushed third parties to end trade with Russia during the conflict, including purchase of Russian hydrocarbons. This strategy was successful within Europe; even nonbelligerent countries were loath to trade with a NATO enemy during the war, and most trade was hazardous to conduct across high-intensity battlefields in any case. U.S. allies in Asia also limited or deferred trade with Russia. Together, these countries constituted the bulk of Russia's main trading partners, so the near-term economic effects on Russia were substantial. Foreign investment in Russia slowed to a trickle during the war as most international firms perceived a tremendous risk associated with such investments. China, however, asserted its rights as a neutral nation to trade with both sides, and continued business as usual, despite U.S. diplomatic pressure. The United States declined to take retaliatory steps against China during the war.

³¹³ As discussed in Chapter 1, this or any other NSNW exchange could trigger a strategic nuclear exchange as the result of either a deliberate or inadvertent Russian counterlaunch. In this case, Russian leaders might have misinterpreted the U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile strike as just the first wave in a U.S. counterforce attack intended to disarm or destroy Russia and ordered an immediate launch of Russia's own strategic nuclear weapons in response.

Nonaligned states in other regions (including India) strongly preferred not to take sides but saw their commerce with Russia reduced by the effects and uncertainty of the war.

Russian talking points blamed NATO for the conflict, arguing that hostilities were the natural result of NATO's decades-long aggression toward Russia in Eastern Europe and that, in the face of NATO provocations, such a conflict was only a matter of time. Russia strongly encouraged other states to stand up for state sovereignty, which Russia was defending in demanding unfettered access to Kaliningrad, placing itself in the long line of states threatened with Western-led regime change. The argument had resonance in some states, particularly in the Balkans and the Middle East. However, those states had limited military, economic, and/or diplomatic capacity to assist Russia, or they had limited incentive to take sides. Russia's messaging therefore had some success, but not in ways that materially affected the course of the conflict.

Russia threatened to cut off natural gas shipments to European countries during the conflict, but this had little effect on countries that had already decided not to send money to an adversary during a war. The reduction in natural gas shipments from Russia resulted in serious energy shortages and rationing, which hit particularly hard because the conflict took place in the fall and winter.

Political Alignments and Allied Contributions Throughout the Conflict

In this scenario, outright Russian aggression led to rapid agreement among NATO allies about the invocation of Article V collective defense responsibilities. Notwithstanding this unity on the surface, several allies sought to maintain distance from the conflict because of economic and political ties with Russia and because of concerns about retaliation. The United States was also disappointed by the lack of force contributions offered by some of Europe's largest militaries. The following sections discuss allied contributions and the logic behind them. We focus on the UK, France, Poland, Germany, Italy, NATO partner Sweden, and Turkey.

United Kingdom

The British government viewed NATO's response to the Russian invasion as an existential matter for the transatlantic alliance. Among the British political elite, Britain's 2020 exit from the EU provided particular urgency for the need to demonstrate solidarity with European allies and with the United States.³¹⁴ Thus, the UK was determined to make a substantial contribution to an allied victory and provided all available assets from the RAF air command, save those needed for defensive operations over British airspace. Additionally, the UK provided a heavy battalion at the outset of hostilities, pledging a brigade over the following months, given time to prepare

³¹⁴ Leslie Vinjamuri and Jason Naselli, "Brexit Makes NATO Even More Important for the Atlantic," *Chatham House*, April 4, 2019.

and mobilize its aging tank fleet.³¹⁵ The UK also provided a carrier strike group to the maritime operation and SOFs to support efforts behind the lines.³¹⁶

As Russian nuclear threats mounted, the British government publicly reiterated that it would use its nuclear forces in “the most extreme circumstance of self-defense, including in the defense of our NATO Allies” and that any adversary using nuclear weapons against British forces or the UK itself risked strategic retaliation.³¹⁷ In the end, however, nuclear retaliation for a Russian NSNW strike on UK territory was conducted by the United States: NATO sought to deescalate the conflict by limiting its response to several Russian NSNW strikes to a single U.S. NSNW strike.

France

During NAC discussions on Article V, the French president publicly committed a large number of air, land, and maritime forces. A longtime proponent of stronger European defense capabilities in response to Russian aggression, France perceived the conflict as a critical juncture for European security and an opportunity to assert French leadership.³¹⁸

As Russian nuclear threats escalated, France publicly referenced its nuclear “life insurance policy.”³¹⁹ The French air force also alerted its nuclear-capable Rafale BF3 strike fighters, which had previously been held in reserve, and began using them for highly publicized deterrence patrols over French territory. However, in contrast to the UK, France stopped short of committing to use its nuclear weapons in defense of other NATO states. Although the concept of a French “umbrella” covering Europe had been floated by prior French leaders, such a commitment failed to materialize during the crisis because of both widespread French public opposition to the use of nuclear weapons and a belief that French threats of nuclear retaliation for

³¹⁵ Recent RAND analysis suggests that the UK would be require between 30 and 90 days to scale up to a full armored brigade. Michael Shurkin, *The Abilities of the British, French, and German Armies to Generate and Sustain Armored Brigades in the Baltics*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1629-A, 2017; also see Lucy Fisher, “British Army Outgunned by Cambodia After Tank Cuts,” *The Times*, April 19, 2019.

³¹⁶ In June 2020, Britain’s Royal Navy took delivery of two new aircraft carriers, HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Prince of Wales*. Despite operational challenges, this scenario assumes that the British Ministry of Defence will achieve its “tight timetable” to develop full operating capability for a carrier strike group by 2023 (Andrew Chuter, “Here’s Why Britain Is Struggling to Form a Fully Effective Carrier Strike Group” *Defense News*, June 26, 2020).

³¹⁷ British Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, London, UK, October 2010. For other similar statements, see John Gower, *Nuclear Signaling Between NATO and Russia*, London, UK: European Leadership Network, October 2018.

³¹⁸ During the 2020 Munich Security Conference, for example, French President Emmanuel Macron outlined what some European commentators later called a “Macron Doctrine”—a new vision for European security with French and German leadership and increased independence from the United States. For example, see Michel Duclos, “After Munich, a Macron Doctrine on Strategic Affairs,” *Institute Montaigne*, blog post, February 26, 2020.

³¹⁹ Arms Control Association, “Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: France,” fact sheet, Washington, D.C., July 2019; Nuclear Threat Initiative, “France,” webpage, May 2016.

Russian NSNW strikes on other NATO states—what some French strategists dismissed as “trading Paris for Poznań”—were inherently not credible.³²⁰

Poland

Poland’s slide toward autocracy persisted in the years immediately prior to the war, contributing to diplomatic tensions within the EU and with Poland’s NATO allies. Despite these tensions, both NATO’s unequivocal support for Polish and Lithuanian right to self-defense against Russia and its swift military action to regain access to Polish airspace validated Poland’s long-standing investments in the alliance.³²¹ The affirmation of Polish faith in NATO collective defense further reinforced the already strong public support for a Polish division-sized contribution under SACEUR control.³²² Despite devastating losses in the initial wave of Polish forces committed to the fighting in Lithuania and infrastructure damage from Russian missile strikes, the resolve of the Polish government remained strong throughout the conflict because of perceptions of the stakes as existential.

Germany

Initially, Germany contributed to the war effort by providing the alliance with unrestricted access to German land and airspace, logistics support, and CAPs over German territory to protect allied forces and bases. Prior to the war, Germany had envisioned the allied Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm, Germany, as a core contribution to collective defense.³²³ Such contributions were straightforward because they did not require a parliamentary mandate.³²⁴ Although Germany’s government and military leadership were prepared to contribute combat forces, they did not receive the required parliamentary authorization for foreign deployment beyond the German forces already committed to Lithuania under the eFP.³²⁵ In the German media and social media, “never again war” coalitions emerged to advocate military restraint,

³²⁰ Duclos, 2020; Rebecca Johnson, “Macron’s Post-Brexit Nuclear Ambitions Are Destined to Fail,” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2020.

³²¹ Monika Sieradzka, “After 20 Years in NATO, Poland Still Eager to Please,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 3, 2019.

³²² “Some 71% of Poles Think Poland Should Defend Baltics in Case of Attack,” *Delfi.en*, November 10, 2016.

³²³ NATO, “New NATO Command Declared Operational,” September 17, 2019; Sabine Siebold and Andrea Shalal, “Germany Chooses Ulm for New Proposed NATO Logistics Command,” *Reuters*, March 20, 2018.

³²⁴ A 2015 German High Court ruling found that “if the use of armed force is limited to self-defense and the deployment is of a nonmilitary nature, no parliamentary approval is needed” (Bundesverfassungsgericht (Federal Constitutional Court of Germany), “On the Scope of the Requirement of Parliamentary Approval for Deployments of the Armed Forces in Cases of Imminent Danger,” Press Release No. 71/2015, Karlsruhe, Germany, September 23, 2015).

³²⁵ While its necessity is unclear under German constitutional law, we assume a parliamentary mandate would be required in this scenario (Charlotte Ku and Harold Jacobson, *Democratic Accountability and the Use of Force in International Law*, Portsmouth, UK: Cambridge University Press, February 17, 2003).

while, “never again alone” groups insisted on honoring allied commitments.³²⁶ From St. Petersburg, Russian disinformation agents seized on opportunities to exacerbate German political cleavages.³²⁷

Germany’s internal fractures intensified after the Russian president threatened nuclear strikes. Citizen leaders from the climate change movement “Fridays for Future” and from Germany’s anti-nuclear energy movement mobilized supporters from across the nation to protest Germany’s role in the conflict.³²⁸

For the German government, events surrounding Russian nuclear use on German soil represented a major political turning point. The U.S. decision to send ships into the Barents Sea irked even German centrist leaders, many of whom saw the move as unnecessarily provocative. Although the German government conveyed condolences for the loss of American lives after the Russian nuclear attack on the three ships, it also warned the United States that it could not support escalatory actions in response.

Thus, when the United States persisted in a conventional retaliation to the initial wave of Russian nuclear strikes (which it believed to be a restrained response), incurring a further Russian nuclear response on German soil, the political tide in Germany turned precipitously toward the antiwar position. Previously, German leaders had argued that participation in the war would offer an opportunity to prevent excessively escalatory decisions.³²⁹ During the conflict, nuclear events rapidly escalated beyond German control. In a public speech, the German chancellor announced that although Germany would continue to provide access to allied forces and equipment transiting the country, it would no longer permit foreign forces to conduct offensive air strikes against Russia using German bases.

³²⁶ Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “A Postwar History of German Security Culture,” in Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, ed., *Germany, Pacifism, and Peace Enforcement*, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006.

³²⁷ For a discussion of Russian influence operations, see Jeffrey Mankoff, “Russian Influence Operations in Germany and Their Effect,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, commentary, Washington, D.C., February 3, 2020.

³²⁸ These groups have organized large protests in the past (“Tens of Thousands of People in Germany Rally Against Climate Change,” *The Local*, November 20, 2019).

³²⁹ In February 2020, Free Democratic Party defense affairs spokeswoman Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann stated that “it is naive to believe that Germany would have the same influence on NATO’s nuclear strategy if U.S. nuclear weapons were withdrawn” (Timothy Jones, “Germany: SPD Call to Withdraw US Nuclear Arms Stokes Debate,” *Deutsche Welle*, February 5, 2020).

Italy

The Italian parliament did not approve deployment of Italian personnel or equipment to the conflict.³³⁰ Opposition to Italian participation in the war was led by a right-left coalition.³³¹ Several centrist coalition parliamentarians also voted against Italian participation, citing a need to focus on domestic priorities. Over the preceding decade, Russia and Italy had engaged heavily in bilateral trade, predominantly in Russian gas.

The Italian government pledged to continue to support allied air operations from Aviano and Sigonella.³³² It additionally provided local expertise from its F-35 facility at Cameri Air Base to provide sustainment for allied F-35 operational fleets. However, public support for the operation collapsed once Russian conventional cruise missiles began to strike Italian bases and as the United States considered responses to Russian nuclear strikes.³³³ Although Italy continued to permit U.S. basing, it requested that the United States cease offensive operations from Italian soil.

Sweden

The United States had taken steps to enhance its security relationship with Sweden during the decade leading up to the war. However, once the conflict entered the high-intensity phase, Sweden's status as a non-NATO ally reflected the limitations of Swedish commitments to the alliance. The Swedish parliament debated the nature of its obligations to a fellow EU member under armed attack.³³⁴ Ultimately, however, the Social Democratic-led government determined that it would not have the necessary public support to participate in the conflict.³³⁵ It decided not to contribute forces or equipment to the conflict and, furthermore, to deny basing access to NATO aircraft conducting offensive missions during the conflict.

Sweden did initially permit overflight and provided defensive counterair (DCA) missions over Swedish airspace, providing some secondary benefits for the protection of Norwegian

³³⁰ Fabrizio Coticchia and Valerio Vignoli, "Italian Political Parties and Military Operations: An Empirical Analysis on Voting Patterns," *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol. 55, No. 3, July 2020.

³³¹ This coalition could feature the 5 Star Movement and Northern League on the right and a collection of green and socialist parties on the far left.

³³² Although a treaty has governed U.S. access at Aviano since 1954, the base remains under Italian sovereignty (Karl P. Mueller, ed., *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-676-AF, 2015).

³³³ In a 2007 poll in Italy, 69.9 percent of respondents said that they felt that use of a nuclear weapon by NATO would never be justified. Simons Foundation and Angus Reid Strategies, *Global Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons*, Vancouver, Canada, 2007.

³³⁴ Although the EU Treaty's Article 42.7 obligates EU countries to assist fellow member states during armed aggression, the language of the article protects the neutrality of member states, such as Sweden. Ian Traynor, "France Invokes EU's Article 42.7, But What Does It Mean?" *The Guardian*, November 17, 2015.

³³⁵ Suvi Turtiainen, "Despite Crimea, Finland and Sweden stay wary of NATO," European Council on Foreign Relations, commentary, April 22, 2014.

airspace. Once Russia began launching cruise missile salvos against other European contributors—and threatening nuclear strikes—Sweden requested that the United States and other allies avoid Swedish airspace.³³⁶

Turkey

Turkey sought to avoid participation in an operation that did not address its core security interests in its home region (Syria) or domestically (Kurdish demands for autonomy) and which threatened to scupper its increasingly important economic and security relationship with the Russian Federation. In the years prior to the war, the Turkish government increasingly viewed its security relationship with the United States and Europe through a transactional lens; in this case, the benefits to participation did not appear to outweigh the potential costs. To minimize its role in the conflict and reduce the likelihood of Russian retaliation, Turkey heavily restricted U.S. access to Incirlik Air Base.³³⁷

As the conflict escalated to a tactical nuclear exchange, Turkey shut down its airspace to all belligerent aircraft, reinforcing its demand with a public announcement that Turkish S-400s were authorized to shoot down defiant aircraft.³³⁸ Furthermore, invoking Article 21 of the 1936 Montreux Convention, Turkey closed the Turkish Straits to all foreign warships, even though the area had not yet been part of the conflict.³³⁹

Length, Intensity, Scope, and Scale of Damage

The war lasted five months; nearly three months of which involved low-intensity conflict short of conventional war. The United States had the ability to sustain the conflict for a longer time, particularly at conventional levels, but the conflict ended because of the possibility of an escalating strategic nuclear exchange between Russia and the United States. The pressures that drove escalation to this level were dual-pronged, driven both by Russia's inability to sustain a high-intensity conventional conflict and by the large numbers of casualties suffered by Western forces and civilian populations. When fighting ended, the NATO states had suffered more than

³³⁶ Civil emergency measures during the decade prior to the war featured the development of underground nuclear bunkers for some of Sweden's civilian population. Samuel Osborne, "Sweden Preparing Hundreds of Nuclear Bunkers amid Fears of Russian Attack," *The Independent*, March 22, 2017.

³³⁷ Previous RAND work examining historical examples of access restrictions has found that transactional partners motivated primarily by compensation are the least reliable providers of access (Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Jennifer Kavanagh, *Access Granted: Political Challenges to the U.S. Overseas Military Presence, 1945–2014*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1339-AF, 2016).

³³⁸ Eric Schmitt and Dan Bilefsky, "Turkey Interrupts U.S. Air Missions Against ISIS at Major Base," *New York Times*, July 16, 2016.

³³⁹ Article 20 of the Montreux Convention states that "in time of war, Turkey being belligerent, the provisions of Articles 10 to 18 shall not be applicable; the passage of warships shall be left entirely to the discretion of the Turkish Government." Article 21 states that "Should Turkey consider herself to be threatened with imminent danger of war she shall have the right to apply the provisions of Article 20 of the present Convention" (Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits Signed at Montreux, adopted July 20, 1936, entered into force December 11, 1936).

55,000 deaths on the battlefield and in Russian conventional and nuclear attacks against allied bases, approximately 60 percent of which were military personnel, not counting additional thousands of deaths, the great majority of them civilian, that occurred as a result of nuclear weapon effects after the fighting ended. Many more were severely wounded or injured. Total Russian fatalities numbered at least 25,000, mostly among military forces in Belarus and Kaliningrad.

By the time a cease-fire was agreed on, the military capacity and infrastructure in Poland, and Lithuania were severely damaged. NATO's attacks had led to disastrous losses for Russian tactical aviation and for strategic SAMs in Kaliningrad and some parts of western Russia. In addition to facilities destroyed in the nuclear strikes, Russia's conventional attacks on NATO air bases damaged some of the primary military facilities in Europe. NATO was able to use alternative basing locations in Spain and other dispersal locations outside the range of most Russian conventional PGMs. Military infrastructure damage was also significant but not necessarily permanent: Runways could be repaired and alternate bases could be found. The loss of certain exquisite capabilities—such as advanced combat aircraft, tankers, and airborne C2 and ISR platforms—would require significant prioritization in the postwar period. The economic devastation of the nuclear exchange was immense in targeted areas. Blast effects destroyed civilian homes and infrastructure, and economic activities in surrounding areas were disrupted.³⁴⁰

In contrast to the humanitarian and economic consequences of the blasts, the ecological consequences proved relatively transient. Because each side ensured that its blasts occurred at a sufficient altitude to minimize the production of fallout plumes, only survivors who had been relatively close to the blasts' epicenters, and therefore were subject to intense prompt ionizing radiation, suffered much higher lifetime risks of cancer.³⁴¹ Some localized fallout was produced by rainout events, but this, too, proved very limited because of the meteorological conditions in the vicinities of the targets and the yields of many of the warheads used.

Role of Airpower During the Conflict

In this scenario, airpower played an extensive initial role for Russia and NATO and a significant role throughout. Russian air defenses played a significant role in the attrition of U.S. and NATO airpower, although Russian fighter aviation was less capable in air-to-air

³⁴⁰ Major failures of power grids, such as the 2003 Northeast Blackout, which lasted only a handful of hours in most affected locations, caused \$6–10 billion in estimated damages (Electricity Consumers Resource Council, *The Economic Impact of the August 2003 Blackout*, Everett, Wash., February 9, 2004).

³⁴¹ For recent assessments of the risk of nuclear winter associated with nuclear exchanges, see Joshua Coupe, Charles G. Bardeen, Alan Robock, and Owen B. Toon, "Nuclear Winter Responses to Nuclear War Between the United States and Russia in the Whole Atmosphere Community Climate Model Version 4 and the Goddard Institute for Space Studies ModelE," *Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres*, Vol. 124, No. 15, 2019; and Jon Reisner, Gennaro D'Angelo, Eunmo Koo, Wesley Even, Matthew Hecht, Elizabeth Hunke, Darin Comeau, Randall Bos, and James Cooley, "Climate Impact of a Regional Nuclear Weapons Exchange: An Improved Assessment Based on Detailed Source Calculations," *Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres*, Vol. 123, No. 5, 2018.

engagements. Russian long-range strategic bombers were used to launch Kh-101 missile strikes from sanctuary inside Russia, but these missiles did not cause major damage at large U.S. military bases unless deployed in overwhelming numbers or with smart-targeting strategies. In this scenario, naval forces played a supporting role, conducting land-attack missions as possible and holding U.S. forces at risk in the Baltics, Black Sea, and Arctic. Russian ground forces were primarily involved in securing and occupying ground lines of communication from Belarus through Lithuania. Russian ground-based artillery fires and short- and intermediate-range missiles posed a particular problem for NATO forces.³⁴²

Airpower was central to virtually all of NATO's operations, representing the domain in which NATO had the greatest advantage over Russia and helping to counterbalance Russian numerical and firepower advantages on the ground. However, applying it to its maximum potential was impeded by Russia's potent air defenses, which were too robust to roll back quickly using the suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) capabilities. Thus, NATO airpower was faced with the choice of either pressing into areas where even fifth-generation aircraft could expect to suffer heavy losses from unsuppressed SAMs or operating at standoff ranges where its effectiveness would be limited by several factors, such as the number of advanced long-range PGMs available. NATO ultimately chose to press forward.

An additional challenge facing U.S. and NATO airpower was the vulnerability of operating bases to Russian missile attacks. This threat was ameliorated to a substantial degree by distributed basing in concert with the relative abundance of European air bases with hardened aircraft shelters for fighters—a legacy of the Cold War—compared with the Pacific theater, but these characteristics also reduced the efficiency with which sorties were generated and aircraft were maintained (compared with previous conflicts when the United States operated from a small number of large operating bases).

Narrative of Post-Conflict Developments

In the aftermath of the 2027 Russia-NATO war, the belligerents initially focused on taking steps to decrease the risk of another conflict. At the time of the cease-fire, Russian forces were still in Lithuania. U.S. and other NATO forces were hesitant to redeploy from their wartime locations. At the same time, both sides recognized that the presence of large numbers of forces in such close proximity was inherently dangerous. In negotiations that stretched over several months, NATO and Russia eventually agreed to what both believed would be a durable postwar settlement. Russia would withdraw its forces from Lithuania, and Lithuania would restart transit arrangements allowing Russian citizens to travel to and from Kaliningrad. Furthermore, Russia would accept substantial limits on forces and systems in Kaliningrad, including limits on air

³⁴² Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-231-A, 2018.

defense capabilities, and agree not to introduce any Russian forces into Belarus or into a narrow (50 km) strip of land along the Russian borders with Estonia and Latvia. In return, NATO would agree to station no foreign military forces in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania.³⁴³ The agreement was immensely controversial within NATO: Germany, France, and many other Western European allies supported it while Eastern European allies, including the four states most directly affected, strongly opposed it. In the end, consensus was only reached after Western European allies threatened to leave NATO altogether if the agreement were not put into place, and the United States tacitly (though not overtly) supported them.

Although the agreement was successfully implemented and appeared to reduce the risk of near-term conflict recurrence, it led to a series of destabilizing changes throughout Europe. Poland, feeling abandoned and betrayed by its Western European allies, turned sharply toward authoritarianism and militarism, increasing its defense spending and beginning a nuclear weapons program. Western European efforts to sanction Poland over the pursuit of a nuclear program heightened tensions within the EU and sabotaged French efforts to strengthen European-led defense initiatives over transatlantic ones.

Most dramatically, however, after the postwar agreement was implemented, German anger over having been targeted with nuclear weapons led to a German election that returned a new government. This anti-NATO coalition called for the end of the U.S. military presence in Germany within one year.³⁴⁴ At the same time, Germany announced it was withdrawing from the NATO military command structure. These two developments sent shockwaves through the alliance, rupturing U.S.-German relations and heightening tensions with Eastern European states that now viewed the German push for the postwar settlement limits on NATO basing on their territory as an abject betrayal.

Although Moscow initially viewed the tensions within NATO with excitement, this faded over time as it became clear that the United States would persist in its Article V guarantee to all NATO members, and would retain substantial presence in Europe. Furthermore, Poland's rearmament and nuclear program elicited much greater concern, particularly as it became clear that the arms limitations in Kaliningrad and Belarus left the former at risk of attack from growing Polish forces and the latter more open to closer relations with Poland, Ukraine, and the EU. By 2030, Russia was actively exploring the potential for breaking out of the postwar settlement, though it had not yet done so.

In Washington, the results of the war were viewed with anxiety. The conflict had led to the destruction of a substantial portion of U.S. military hardware, losses that left the United States weaker in Asia. Although Russia was substantially weakened by the war, China was not. The Pacific therefore became the focus of U.S. rebuilding efforts. The later eviction of U.S. forces

³⁴³ An inspection regime was further introduced so that both sides could verify compliance with the agreed-on limitations on forces in the designated areas.

³⁴⁴ Many are relocated to the UK, Belgium, or the Netherlands, but overall U.S. presence in Europe is reduced.

from Germany, combined with the infighting within NATO in the aftermath of the war, led to a reduction in U.S. presence in Europe and attention to the continent more broadly. Many U.S. analysts privately argued that NATO was being kept together only by the desire to avoid the perception that Russian nuclear use had succeeded.

The war's greatest beneficiary was China. Although the United States and Russia suffered substantial military losses, China's military was intact after the war, and China took advantage of the diplomatic fissures that resulted. China's growing clout further stressed the traditional U.S.-led international system that saw key pillars, such as the nuclear use taboo and nonproliferation, under strain.

Key Issues in the Post-Conflict Period

Territorial and Major Domestic Political Change

Although no territory changed hands as a result of the war, both Russia and Poland experienced substantial domestic political changes.

Russia

Prior to 2027, Russia had developed plans to prepare its population and military for a coming war. During this "Special Period," which could last a year or more, the government planned to psychologically condition the population to a coming conflict through patriotic education activities and propaganda on state-controlled or state-run media. The military, as part of a general mobilization, would work together with other federal agencies to reach a higher level of readiness.³⁴⁵ However, war had come about unexpectedly in 2027, so Russia only had weeks to condition the population and mobilize the state.

During the war, young city dwellers across many large cities began a grassroots movement against the war. The National Guard used its cyber and counterprotest tools to respond to these protests during the war, leading to thousands of arrests and deaths. However, these heavy-handed tactics provoked further backlash. Still, Russia was able to suppress the protest movement.

However, as Russia became even more economically and politically isolated from the West, elites suffered financially from the isolation. The Kremlin was increasingly unable to bolster its fortunes through illicit finance or other payment methods while government spending focused on reconstruction, rearming the military, and bolstering social spending as possible. Small groups of elites privately began to contemplate alternative leadership. Although no changes to Russian leadership occurred by 2030, a scared and demoralized population and aggrieved elites meant that the regime was even more insecure than it had been before the war.

³⁴⁵ Julian Cooper, *If War Comes Tomorrow: How Russia Prepares for Possible Armed Aggression*, London, UK: Royal United Services Institute, Whitehall Report 4-16, August 2016.

Poland

Poland, which incurred significant damage to its military forces and infrastructure during the course of the conflict, was politically devastated by the terms of the peace settlement. Poland had long viewed the prospect of U.S. permanent presence on Polish soil as an ultimate guarantor of Polish security, and the elimination of this option left them feeling defenseless.³⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Polish public and political elite, still stung by the collective memory of the 1945 Yalta conference, deeply resented the fact that the peace agreement was brokered over their objections by Germany and France, despite the extensive Polish sacrifices during the conflict. Following the conflict, the Polish government took a more nationalistic, militaristic, and authoritarian turn. Conservative nationalist political forces, particularly the Law and Justice (PiS) Party, gained an increased parliamentary majority as voters turned against Western Europe and the EU.³⁴⁷ These forces redoubled their efforts to gain control over the Polish judiciary and eliminate other sources of opposition to one-party rule.

Consequences of Counterspace Operations

Russia viewed NATO's reliance on space assets as a major vulnerability.³⁴⁸ Russia therefore launched extensive attacks on U.S. and allied states' space assets using a wide variety of counterspace weapons, such as DA-ASAT systems.³⁴⁹ In response, the United States used its own counterspace weapons to defend its remaining assets and to reduce Russia's own situational awareness.³⁵⁰

The Russian attacks generated large amounts of debris in LEO and a smaller amount of debris in higher orbits. Much of the LEO debris reentered the atmosphere within a few weeks of the conflict but not before damaging more than a dozen civilian satellites and generating even more debris, some of which was propelled to higher orbits where it was expected to remain for decades and possibly even centuries.

³⁴⁶ In 2018, for example, a Polish defense document reportedly cited "the clear and present need for a permanent U.S. armored division deployed in Poland [and] Poland's commitment to provide significant support that may reach \$1.5–2 billion by establishing joint military installations and provide for more-flexible movement of U.S. forces" (Edyta Zemla and Kamil Turecki, "Poland Offers US Up to \$2B for Permanent Military Base," Politico.EU, May 27, 2018).

³⁴⁷ Marc Santora, "The Roots of Poland's Defiance of the European Union," *New York Times*, 2017.

³⁴⁸ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, Washington, D.C., 2017.

³⁴⁹ On the ways in which Russian views of the threat posed by U.S. and NATO airpower could result in preemptive strategic aerospace operation intended in part to manage escalation (which could include counterspace operations), see Michael Kofman and Anya Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, June 23, 2020; and Thomas R. McCabe, "The Russian Perception of the NATO Aerospace Threat: Could It Lead to Preemption?" *Air and Space Power Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Fall 2016.

³⁵⁰ For a discussion of U.S. counterspace capabilities, see Heginbotham et al., 2015; and U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018a.

The first-order costs to military and civilian satellite systems were significant. Disruption of positioning, navigation, and timing systems also caused significant economic disruption during the conflict, but these effects proved transient in the conflict's aftermath. The same was not true of the second-order effects of the generation of LEO debris, which included prolonged reduced internet and communications functionality, higher insurance rates for satellites and space vehicles, and unexpected attrition of LEO systems because of debris impacts.³⁵¹ The United States suffered especially heavy economic losses in the aftermath of the conflict because of the size and maturity of its commercial space ventures.

Consequences of Cyberspace Operations

Over the course of the war, Russian cyberattacks on the European electrical grids caused some power and communications blackouts across portions of the Baltic states, Poland, and Germany. This inflicted tens of billions of dollars in direct and indirect costs.³⁵² Mortality rates in affected regions rose slightly because of disruptions in emergency services, public utilities, transportation networks, safety systems, and healthcare providers.

After the conflict, Russia and NATO member states invested in making information technology systems more resilient in preparation for future conflicts. Western efforts took the form of more interest in public-private cooperation, more government investments in ensuring private-sector cybersecurity, and developing means for making critical infrastructure more redundant in the face of future cyberattacks. Russia made the same efforts and intensified efforts to construct a national intranet that could continue to operate internally in wartime while allowing Russia to close most external connections, making it more difficult for adversaries to exploit Russian networks.³⁵³

Crucially, the conflict never fully ended in cyberspace. Russian state actors continued to conduct brazen cyberoperations against Poland in the years following the cease-fire, forcing Poland to commit resources to improving its computer network defenses that it could otherwise have invested in conventional forces. Polish demands for a unified and harsh NATO response to these attacks further divided the alliance.

Postwar Geopolitical Changes

Germany

The detonation of Russian NSNWs on German territory and the associated environmental and human health impacts prompted a nationwide outcry in Germany following the war. As

³⁵¹ For a discussion of the potential economic consequences of war in space, see Weston Aviles, *Exploring the Economic Effects of Conflict in Space*, Boston, Mass.: NSI, March 2018.

³⁵² J. R. Minkel, "The 2003 Northeast Blackout—Five Years Later," *Scientific American*, August 13, 2008.

³⁵³ Lily Hay Newman, "Russia Takes a Big Step Toward Internet Isolation," *WIRED*, January 5, 2020.

outrage grew within the German electorate about the strikes, the parliament issued a vote of no confidence in the ruling coalition and a new national election in the months following the conflict yielded a right-left coalition led by the center-left Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, or SPD).

German participation in the NATO alliance, and particularly the U.S. military presence on German soil, was increasingly seen as a liability for German security. German polls revealed that more than 75 percent of citizens wanted all foreign forces and equipment to leave the country.³⁵⁴ With this support, the new German government formally abrogated the 1954 Convention on the Presence of Foreign Forces in the Federal Republic of Germany and requested that U.S. troops relocate.³⁵⁵ The German government also withdrew from NATO nuclear burden-sharing responsibilities, reversing its previous commitment to host nuclear weapons on behalf of the alliance.³⁵⁶

Finally, the German government made the decision to suspend its participation in the NATO command structure, the way that France had under President Charles de Gaulle in 1966. This decision meant that Germany, which had long played a central role in NATO military leadership, no longer participated in military decisionmaking or put German forces under NATO command.³⁵⁷ NATO Air Command in Ramstein was also relocated with no further German staff participation, and a recently established NATO logistics command in Ulm, staffed with German personnel, was no longer an allied entity and would instead function purely as a Bundeswehr facility.

Despite its distrust of the United States and NATO, Germany did not take an entirely isolationist course. The German government agreed with France that the EU, rather than NATO, should be the central venue for military cooperation within Europe.³⁵⁸ Germany also sought less conflictual relations with Russia. After the war, prominent German political voices interpreted the conflict as largely driven by Russian insecurity. Although the German government remained wary of potential future Russian aggression and certainly did not seek closer alignment with

³⁵⁴ This represented a significant increase from 2018, when a survey found that 42 percent of respondents wanted U.S. troops to depart, 37 percent wanted them to stay, and 21 percent were undecided or did not answer (John Vandiver, "Poll: 42% of Germans Want US Troops Out of Country," *Stars and Stripes*, July 12, 2018).

³⁵⁵ German Foreign Federal Office, "Legal Status of Forces in Germany and Abroad," undated. Although this would be an unusual move, there is some precedent for the revocation of basing access by European governments in response to public pressure (David A. Shlapak, John Stillion, Olga Oliker, and Tanya Charlick-Paley, *A Global Access Strategy for the U.S. Air Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1216-AF, 2002).

³⁵⁶ In early 2020, SPD parliamentary group leader Rolf Mützenich called for the withdrawal of foreign nuclear weapons from Germany (Michèle Flournoy and Jim Townsend, "Striking at the Heart of the Trans-Atlantic Bargain," *Der Spiegel International*, March 6, 2020).

³⁵⁷ For example, as of June 2020, the commander of NATO Joint Force Command in Brunssum is a German general (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Commander: General Jörg Vollmer," undated-a).

³⁵⁸ Janosch Delcker, "SPD's Martin Schulz Wants United States of Europe by 2025," *Politico*, December 17, 2017.

Russia, German companies once again began trading with Russian entities several years after the war.

France

With European allies increasingly distrustful of the United States, France seized the opportunity to advance its pursuit of European strategic autonomy. Expanding on the French-German defense industrial collaboration for the Future Combat Air System, France sought to convince other allies to pursue exclusively European defense investment.³⁵⁹ Transatlantic industrial cooperation diminished, although the United States continued to engage with some European air forces through the F-35 international consortium.³⁶⁰

France, which viewed the Russian decision to avoid nuclear strikes on French soil as a validation of its existing nuclear program, sought to invest more heavily in its nuclear deterrent and to expand the program's tactical nuclear capability.³⁶¹ A previous advocate of European independence from the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the French government initiated discussions with several Western European governments—notably Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands—about bilateral nuclear security guarantees.³⁶² However, given France's unwillingness to explicitly extend its nuclear deterrent during the course of the conflict, doubts persisted about the reliability of the proposed French umbrella.

United Kingdom

The UK reiterated its support for the U.S.-UK “special relationship,” further cemented by wartime cooperation between the two countries' security establishments on both strategic and operational matters. London sought to reinvest in transatlantic security ties and agreed to host U.S. forces that were no longer able to operate out of Germany. However, struck by Russian NSNWs despite its own nuclear deterrent, the UK was deeply divided over the future of its role in hosting foreign nuclear weapons on British soil.³⁶³ Ultimately, after a yearlong Ministry of Defence review of British nuclear doctrine, the British government agreed to maintain its role in nuclear burden-sharing and pledged to invest in reacquiring low-yield nuclear capabilities. It also decided to move its nuclear submarine base from Scotland to Milford Haven, Wales, following

³⁵⁹ Sebastian Sprenger, “Germany, France Plot New Steps for Trinational Fighter Jet—But What About Spain?” *DefenseNews*, February 6, 2020a.

³⁶⁰ Congressional Research Service, *F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program*, Washington, D.C., RL30563, May 27, 2020a.

³⁶¹ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, “French Nuclear Forces,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 75, No. 1, 2019a.

³⁶² Rebecca Johnson, 2020.

³⁶³ Sean Atkin, “Unwanted Allies: What Influences Negative Domestic Reactions to Deploying Forces into Allied States?” *Air Power History*, Vol. 51, No. 4, Winter 2004.

threats of Scottish secession.³⁶⁴ This effort placed significant strains on the British defense budget, which was already stressed by the need to reconstitute British conventional capabilities lost during the course of the conflict. These financial strains resulted in delays of the British military's planned nuclear and conventional modernization, which was spread out over the course of several decades.

Poland

The Polish government, deeply fearful of Russia and skeptical of the reliability of its NATO allies, embarked on a major conventional military buildup with U.S. assistance. Polish universal conscription was reinstated and the Territorial Defense Force, founded in 2017 and fully mobilized during the conflict, was expanded beyond its initial force of 53,000 volunteers to encompass all Polish citizens of military age.³⁶⁵ Despite its previous support for nuclear disarmament and reduction in nuclear arsenals, Poland decided to pursue a nuclear weapons program as a deterrent against future Russian aggression.³⁶⁶

The small Russian-speaking minority in Poland was targeted for repression, which in turn increased tensions with Russia. Polish leaders sought closer economic ties with Kaliningrad, leading some outside analysts (including many in Moscow) to conclude that Warsaw was trying to loosen the enclave's connection with the rest of Russia. Poland strengthened its ties with its other eastern neighbors—particularly Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus, where it increasingly vied with Moscow for influence in Minsk. Relations with Western Europe, particularly Germany, declined sharply after Germany's push for the settlement treaty terms, eviction of U.S. forces from its territory, withdrawal from the NATO command structure, and censure of Poland's turn toward autocracy, including the withholding of EU reconstruction funds.³⁶⁷ This further fueled anti-EU sentiment within the Polish electorate, solidifying the position of nationalist forces.

Turkey

The Turkish decision during the conflict to deny U.S. access to Incirlik—and eventually deny overflight access to all of Turkish territory—was viewed by the alliance (particularly in Washington) as a death knell for Turkey's role in NATO. Although the United States did not pursue suspension or expulsion from the alliance, U.S. leaders made clear that the United States

³⁶⁴ Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, Tara Varma, and Nick Witney, *Eyes Tight Shut: European Attitudes Towards Nuclear Deterrence*, London, UK: European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2018a. Scottish National Party, "Trident: What You Need to Know," April 10, 2019.

³⁶⁵ Agence France Presse, "Poland to Build Territorial Defense Force by 2019," Deutsche Welle, November 14, 2016.

³⁶⁶ For earlier Polish positions on nonproliferation, see Andrew Somerville, Ian Kearns, and Malcolm Chalmers, *Poland, NATO, and Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, London, UK: Royal United Services Institute, Occasional Paper, 2012.

³⁶⁷ For a discussion of a 2020 EU response to Poland's domestic changes, see Joanna Berendt, "E.U. Court Rules Poland Must Suspend Disciplinary Panel for Judges," *New York Times*, April 8, 2020.

would no longer support Turkish requests for U.S. or allied support.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, at U.S. urging, NATO Allied Land Command HQ was moved from Izmir, Turkey, to Romania to address Romanian concerns about the postwar settlement and to ensure access during future conflicts.

Its security relationship with the United States destroyed, Turkey more seriously considered a national nuclear program to guard against future regional contingencies with Iran or any other future nuclear weapon states. Floated by Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2019, the concept of a Turkish nuclear program gained greater public support in Turkey after the war.³⁶⁹ Although the Turkish leadership was aware of domestic and international costs of the program, the option looked more attractive in light of reduced U.S. defense commitments.

Despite an enduring mistrust of Russia, the Turkish leadership believed that an improved relationship would be valuable for Turkey's geopolitical position as relations with the United States soured. Good relations could serve as an important security hedge, allowing Turkey to engage with Russia in the Middle East and Black Sea and seek access to Russian military technology.³⁷⁰ In the years following the conflict, defense industrial cooperation increased between Turkey and Russia, and the two countries released a nonbinding statement pledging to enhance the national security relationship through increased information exchange, increased training and exercises, and coordination of strategic messaging.³⁷¹

China

China benefited tremendously from the war both in relative terms—as the United States and Russia each destroyed a substantial portion of the other's military hardware and used nuclear weapons on one another—and in terms of substantial gains from trade with both sides. China further presented itself as a responsible international actor, emphasizing its own no-first-use nuclear policy and selling itself as a comparatively safe destination for trade and investment. China's continued positive trajectory posed substantial problems for U.S. strategy.

³⁶⁸ For examples of previous assistance that reportedly included bilateral support for Turkey's struggle with the Kurdistan Workers Party, see Humeyra Pamuk and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: U.S. Halts Secretive Drone Program with Turkey over Syria Incursion," Reuters, February 5, 2020. On the deployment of U.S., Dutch, German, and Spanish Patriot missile batteries to Turkey during the Syria conflict, see "Spain to Replace Dutch in Turkey Patriot Missile Deployment," Reuters, September 17, 2014.

³⁶⁹ "Erdogan Says It's Unacceptable That Turkey Can't Have Nuclear Weapon," Reuters, September 4, 2019.

³⁷⁰ This was reportedly one of the motivations for Turkey's decision to purchase Russia S-400 systems. In January 2020, a senior Turkish diplomat stated that "there is an understanding [in Ankara] to go as far as possible in earning Russian technology as long as our Western allies keep depriving us of similar technology . . . and that includes the emerging S-500 system." Burak Ege Bekdil, "West's Reluctance to Share Tech Pushes Turkey Further into Russian Orbit," *Defense News*, January 10, 2020.

³⁷¹ These provisions are similar to those in the May 2018 trilateral statement by the United States, Sweden, and Finland (Aaron Mehta, "Finland, Sweden and US Sign Trilateral Agreement, with Eye on Increased Exercises," *Defense News*, May 9, 2018).

Russia's Grand Strategy

Russia's security concerns after the war shifted in several ways. The peace agreement removed foreign forces from areas near Kaliningrad, reducing Russian concerns about a NATO seizure of that Russian territory. The agreement had also created a largely demilitarized zone. With Russian and U.S. forces operating farther from one another, the risks of misperceptions and accidents had been reduced. At the same time, Russia suffered substantial conventional military losses and had seen wide-ranging U.S. attacks on the Russian mainland, increasing Russia's concerns about its ability to defend its homeland in the near term.

Although Russia attempted to mitigate these concerns through its military rebuilding, it recognized that results would be years in the future. Russia invested heavily in intelligence and covert capabilities that might provide it with better advanced warning of U.S. intentions. However, Russia's other options for regaining its apparent losses were limited. The Russian economy was substantially weakened by the war and the resulting disruptions in trade and investment with Europe. Natural gas sales to Europe rebounded only slowly, although international exports of oil remained more consistent, especially to Asia, and oil prices increased gradually.³⁷² The massive losses in military equipment would take years to replace, particularly because funds for defense spending were limited. Russia also saw its geopolitical standing adversely affected because of the widespread perception that it had used nuclear weapons first.

The disunity within Europe following the war did provide some opportunities. Russia eagerly pursued greater security cooperation with Turkey and sought to blame the United States for the conflict. Russia accepted offers of at least some commercial rapprochement from Western European countries that sought to reduce tensions. Natural gas sales resumed to many parts of Europe within five years of the cease-fire, providing a vital source of revenue, albeit at lower levels than before the war. Several Eastern European states, generally those most dependent on Russian natural gas, secured alternative sources, following Poland's example, which had not imported Russian gas since 2022.³⁷³

The main focus of Russian strategy following the war was on strengthening its already close relationship with China. Economically, the relationship with China provided one of the few potential opportunities to rebuild, given continued tensions with Europe and the United States. In security terms, Russia was eager to give the appearance of a Russian-Chinese military partnership as a means of addressing its own weaknesses. In reality, however, Russia remained wary about becoming too firmly entrenched as a junior partner to Beijing in ways that might compromise its own security should tensions between the two states rebound in the future. The

³⁷² For forecasts of expected gradual increases in oil prices in the 2025–2030 time frame, see U.S. Energy Information Administration, “Annual Energy Outlook 2020: Table 12. Petroleum and Other Liquids Prices,” webpage, undated.

³⁷³ Vladimir Soldatkin and Agnieszka Barteczko, “Poland, Russia to Cut Decades-Old Gas Transit Ties,” Reuters, May 15, 2020.

U.S. turn toward the Indo-Pacific offered an immediate reassurance to Russia in the postwar period.

United States' Grand Strategy

The United States faced a complex set of strategic challenges after the war. The unexpectedly destructive war with Russia degraded U.S. conventional capabilities in the near term, hurting the U.S. position in the Indo-Pacific theater. The sharp decline in relations with Germany after the war and loss of U.S. bases in that country after 80 years represented a geopolitical embarrassment, coming so soon after Germany had pressured the United States to accept peace settlement terms limiting U.S. access in Eastern Europe, and fundamentally altered the relationship between the United States and NATO.

The United States remained mindful of the need to sustain its commitments to its Eastern European allies so as not to suggest to potential adversaries, including China, that nuclear coercion could be a successful means of combating U.S. security commitments. The United States reconstituted commands and units at alternative bases, mostly in the UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands, and publicly reaffirmed its Article V commitments to Poland and the Baltic states. However, for fiscal and strategic reasons, the United States quietly deprioritized future spending and attention on European security, although both remained higher than they had been before the war. The losses that the United States suffered during the war forced it to prioritize investments in the Indo-Pacific, a change that likely would have occurred eventually, given China's rise, but at a slower rate. Although there was tremendous public outrage at Russia over the use of nuclear weapons against U.S. forces, Washington sought to limit the effects on U.S. strategic decisions, publicly emphasizing to domestic audiences that U.S. nuclear retaliation (albeit limited) had been highly damaging and instrumental in forcing Russia to accept limits on its ability to station military forces on its own territory and also emphasizing that the settlement treaty was disproportionately beneficial to the United States and NATO. The United States took these steps to enable a shift in its own planning and doctrine to a deterrence-by-punishment approach in Europe, which would be executed primarily by air assets that could be surged into the continent from CONUS and Asia in the event of renewed hostilities. Security cooperation increasingly focused on Eastern European allies while exercises and other activities with Germany, France, and Italy dwindled.

The result was a seeming paradox: A nuclear war with Russia led to decreased U.S. concern about the threat from Russia and increased concern about the threat from China. This was partly because of the substantial losses that Russia suffered in the conflict, reducing the conventional threat it represented, but it also stemmed from the perceived success of the postwar settlement agreement in reducing the likelihood of conflict between NATO allies and Russia. Meanwhile, Washington was highly cognizant of its conventional losses in the war and the disadvantages it would face should China become more aggressive in the Indo-Pacific. Eager to address this concern, Asia became the focus of U.S. military rebuilding and spending going forward.

Risk of Conflict Recurrence

The risk of conflict recurrence in Europe was temporarily muted after the war, partly by the substantial losses suffered by both sides and partly by the genuine concern in both NATO and Russia regarding how escalatory the war became and a resulting desire to take steps to reduce this risk in the future. Both sides were motivated to agree to the postwar settlement that reduced NATO and Russian forces in Eastern Europe, despite the objections of those NATO members whose territory was affected. The U.S. turn toward the Indo-Pacific and tensions among NATO and EU members also tended to reduce Russian insecurities. In the near term, then, the risk of another NATO-Russia conflict appeared to be limited.

However, the settlement also sowed the seeds of longer-term conflict in three main ways. First, the perceived abandonment of Poland by NATO and the resulting Polish turn toward militarism led over time to increasing insecurity by Russia that Poland might seek to evict Russia from Kaliningrad while Russia was in a particularly weak place militarily. The settlement treaty did not limit the military forces of individual Eastern European NATO allies, only foreign forces. This came to be seen in Moscow as a destabilizing loophole, given Poland's emerging capability to threaten Kaliningrad on its own, alongside Poland's growing nuclear deterrent to limit Russian retaliation. This provided incentives for Russia to begin "cheating" on the agreement, increasing its capabilities in Kaliningrad and attempting to disguise the fact from NATO inspections, largely without success.

Second, the treaty's limitations on Russian forces in Belarus also proved unstable. Minsk took the opportunity to increase its ties with Warsaw and Brussels in ways that Russia found unacceptable.³⁷⁴ Although Russia retained other levers to affect Belarus' behavior, it also violated the settlement treaty with occasional troop movements into Belarus to remind Minsk that Russia would not tolerate a westward shift, similar to Ukraine's in 2014, and that Russia opposed strong Polish interest in bringing about precisely such a shift.

Third, the treaty's prohibitions on the forces that Russia could deploy on parts of its own territory, although judged to be a necessary concession during the peace negotiations, proved to be politically calamitous at home for the Kremlin. It was seen as a humiliation, akin to restrictions on German territory and rearmament following World War I. This provided strong incentives for Moscow to explore opportunities to reverse these prohibitions and assess when in the future would be the most advantageous time to abrogate them.

³⁷⁴ As of this writing, the trajectory of ongoing protests in Belarus over the 2020 presidential election remained uncertain. While there remains the possibility that President Alexander Lukashenko might be forced to leave office, a development that would have echoes of then-President Viktor Yanukovich's ouster in Ukraine in 2014, Russia has also signaled that it might be willing to use force to preserve Belarus' essentially pro-Moscow orientation. For the purposes of this report, we assume that a Belarusian government with close ties to Moscow remains in power in 2027. For background, see Alexander Baunov, "Domestic Geopolitics: Belarusian Protests and Russia's Power Transition," Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, Russia, September 1, 2020; and "Staying Put: In Belarus, Neither Dictator nor Protestors Are Backing Down," *The Economist*, November 5, 2020.

Although the settlement treaty largely held for the first five years after the conflict, these tensions led to a perception in both Europe and Russia that it was unlikely to prove sustainable over the longer term. These tensions also fostered uncertainty regarding how NATO and the United States would react once Russia violated the treaty.

Risk of Conflict with Other Great Powers

China was very satisfied by the outcome of the war, which led to both a weakened United States and a weaker Russia more dependent on its relationship with China. China assessed U.S. conventional weakness in the aftermath of the war as increasing Beijing's ability to successfully invade Taiwan or assert claims to disputed maritime areas, but China also assessed that being perceived as initiating a second destabilizing and aggressive war soon after the 2027 war would sharply increase longer-term resistance throughout the international community to China's continued rise. Chinese concerns about the United States increased because Washington had demonstrated a willingness to use NSNWs in defense of its allies (albeit only after Russia initiated nuclear use); China felt greater unease regarding whether the United States might be willing to do so in a Pacific war as well. The United States had also gained operational experience against another great power, something China's military lacked. The net result of these calculations was that China was happy to pocket the substantial geopolitical windfall of a U.S.-Russia war without a desire to risk those gains by starting another conflict of its own.

Over the longer term, tensions between China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific remained acute, particularly as the United States focused its military rebuilding on that region at the expense of Europe. Both the United States and China perceived an increased cost to such a potential conflict because of the higher perceived likelihood that NSNWs could be used in a warfighting capacity. Although this heightened risk of nuclear use gave both sides pause, the underlying tensions that continued to drive the risk of war in Asia—the status of Taiwan, the changing relative power in the region, China's series of bilateral disputes with its neighbors—were otherwise not dramatically affected by the war in Europe.

International Order

The international order was substantially affected by the 2027 Russia-NATO war. The most immediate, dramatic effect was on nuclear norms and counterproliferation regimes. The use of NSNWs as warfighting weapons, first by Russia and later by the United States, and the overall lack of consequences that both sides faced as a result led numerous states to conclude that they must consider acquiring or expanding their possession of NSNWs as a necessary part of their capabilities for conflicts that might involve nuclear-armed adversaries. This led China and France, particularly, to increase their investments in NSNW programs and to revise their nuclear doctrines accordingly. The long-standing norm against nuclear use in warfare appeared to have been dramatically weakened, although not abandoned.

The centrality of nuclear weapons to the termination of the war also led other states to reevaluate the importance of having nuclear weapons programs of their own. Poland was the first state to pursue such a program, but the relative lack of pushback it received in doing so, partly because of sympathy for the substantial destruction it experienced during the war, emboldened other states to consider programs of their own. Turkey and Saudi Arabia were the next to pursue such programs, although no state other than Poland had achieved a nuclear weapons capability by 2030. The United States, long a key proponent of the nonproliferation regime, having acquiesced to and even tacitly encouraged the Polish nuclear program, found little international consensus as it considered efforts to punish Ankara or Riyadh for their programs. U.S. Asian allies, including South Korea and Japan, also revisited their prior decisions not to pursue nuclear programs, ultimately deciding against doing so having seen both the apparently limited deterrent effects that such programs had on Russian strikes on the UK and the demonstrated U.S. willingness to respond to attacks on the territory of allies that limited concerns of abandonment.

Several key existing international institutions were weakened in the aftermath of the war. The UN Security Council dramatically reduced its number of resolutions passed and meetings held, returning to a Cold War–era rigidity as ongoing antipathy between Russia and the United States led each side to reflexively veto any resolution supported by the other. NATO, while continuing to exist, was dramatically weakened by the German withdrawal from its military structure and the ongoing political tensions generated by the war. Large-scale NATO exercises ceased to be held, and military planning for future contingencies increasingly atrophied or devolved to national or bilateral levels. Despite the wishes of France and Germany to refocus from transatlantic security efforts to European ones, the sharp tensions between Eastern and Western European states after the war hamstrung EU operations. This was perhaps most vividly illustrated by the German refusal to approve reconstruction funding for Poland because of the latter’s shift toward authoritarianism, an affront that led Poland to attempt to organize an Eastern European boycott of EU institutions. Amid this chaos, France and Germany began exploring smaller institutional groupings, focusing on other like-minded Western European states. But by 2030, those efforts had not made any substantial progress. On several fronts, then, the war left the international system weaker and less effective than it had been before.

One state that took most of these changes in stride was China. Although anxious about the potential for wider nuclear proliferation, particularly should it spread to such states as Japan or Taiwan, China recognized that the overall weakening of the U.S.-led international system provided it with substantial opportunities for greater influence. Emphasizing the tensions within the EU over Poland’s direction, China argued for all international bodies to remain agnostic as to the regime types of their members. China further emphasized the irresponsibility of both U.S. and Russian actions during the war, in contrast with its own no-first-use nuclear policy and smaller arsenal. Painting Western countries as hopelessly warlike and aggressive, China began a widespread diplomatic and informational campaign in favor of an Asia-centric, consensus-based international system and a central role for China as its leading power. Resistance to a Sino-

centric international system within Asia remained acute, but states did grow increasingly concerned about whether the U.S.-led system might need fundamental revisions and whether the United States remained capable of helping to bring about such revisions.

Implications for the Joint Force in This Postwar Setting

In this postwar setting, the joint force would face rebuilding while making significant changes in posture. The loss of bases in Germany and Turkey would require moving forces and headquarters. For example, we imagine that U.S. European Command headquarters might relocate to be near NATO headquarters in Mons, Belgium; APS sets might move to the Netherlands; U.S. Africa Command headquarters might move to France; and Air Command might move to the UK. Other NATO and U.S. ground units might move to Romania. With the United States expecting a more durable peace in Europe after the war, the problem of war with Russia would decline in relative importance. Still, the U.S. decision to retain its NATO commitments and forces in Europe would mean the joint force would still be responsible for deterring and, if necessary, prevailing in such a war. We anticipate that the United States would shift toward a strategy of deterrence by threat of punishment. Therefore, in addition to adjusting to a new posture in Europe, the joint force would be called to develop a new military strategy.

In the aftermath of a war with Russia and a shift toward greater focus on the Indo-Pacific as the priority theater, the Middle East would decline even more in importance to a U.S. grand strategy. Still, the United States would shift its focus, to the extent that it retained relationships with the region. The loss of Turkey as a U.S. partner made other U.S. partners in the Middle East, such as Jordan and Qatar, more important.

6. Conclusion

This concluding chapter has two sections. First, we discuss several analytical observations regarding what policymakers might expect from great power wars. Although some conditions for our scenarios were artificially specified, many others were the result of detailed analysis of the likely behavior of states and therefore reveal noteworthy patterns. Second, we provide a limited number of targeted recommendations for policymakers. Although this report is, by design, speculative in nature (and therefore difficult to use for grounding firm policy recommendations), we did identify certain areas that warrant greater policymaker attention.

Analytical Observations

As discussed in Chapter 1, our scenarios were not designed to predict future events or to indicate which are most likely. We scoped the analysis to consider conventional wars that last several months. Moreover, we determined the victor for each scenario and levels of nuclear escalation in advance (Table 6.1). We then designed scenarios that could plausibly lead to these outcomes. However, we also conducted a rigorous analysis of how states could respond to or behave in the circumstances we constructed. This section focuses on the resulting patterns we identified that are analytically driven.

Table 6.1. Summary of Scenarios

Scenario	Victor	Role of Nuclear Weapons	Length	Strategic Outcomes
China annexes Taiwan	China	Conflict ends with China's demonstration of an NSNW	8 months	- China solidifies control of Taiwan. - A U.S.-led multilateral counterbalancing alliance forms. - Japan, South Korea pursue nuclear weapons.
The United States degrades China's military power after an East China Sea conflict expands	United States and Japan	Possibility of nuclear escalation affects combatants' targeting	6 months	- China commits to military rebuilding program. - Russia and China formalize a military alliance. - U.S. allies and partners continue to hedge.
A Taiwan conflict ends indecisively	Indecisive	Possibility of nuclear escalation affects combatants' targeting	4 months	- The possibility of renewed conflict drives a regional arms race. - U.S. troops remain on Taiwan. - The PRC restarts conflict to take Taiwan four years later.
War caused by Russian misperception ends in restrictions on military forces in northeastern Europe	Indecisive	Russian losses lead to use of NSNWs and to U.S. use of NSNWs in response	3 months	- A NATO-Russia agreement limits foreign forces in Baltic States, Poland, Belarus, and Kaliningrad. - Germany revokes U.S. basing access, forcing a posture realignment. - Poland initiates nuclear program and shifts toward authoritarianism.

Length and Destructiveness of Our Scenarios Limited by Historical Standards Relating to Nuclear Weapons, Geography, and State Capabilities

As part of the project's design, we attempted to identify plausible wars that were at least several months long. Our decision not to examine strategic or large-scale nuclear exchanges was artificial and contributed to less-destructive outcomes. However, other factors that limited the length and destructiveness of our scenarios might be predictive of future conflicts and not merely a reflection of our analytical scope.

Nuclear weapons: Our scenarios intentionally scoped out circumstances that result in a large-scale nuclear exchange. Still, we assessed that the possibility of nuclear escalation would weigh on decisionmakers in any conflict. In particular, it limited both the type of targets that countries chose to strike and the overall level of devastation, for fear of facing massive retaliation. It also limited the strategic goals that states pursued during the conflict, effectively taking any efforts to pursue total victory off the table.

Local versus global balance of power: The United States, despite remaining the predominant global power, could be more evenly matched with a potential adversary on that state's periphery at the outset of a war. The longer the conflict lasts, however, the more U.S. global military advantages would likely come to bear—especially in Europe. If its regime and homeland territory were threatened, Russia could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons to

compensate (a possibility that we consider in one of our scenarios), but such escalation would also likely limit the length of time the war could go on.

Geography of the Indo-Pacific and issues at stake between the United States and China:

The geography of the region and the core issues at stake between the United States and China (e.g., Taiwan, disputed maritime areas) are unlikely to lead to a sizable ground war. Of course, the two countries fought on land during the Korean War, and war involving both the United States and China on the Korean Peninsula is plausible although not probable.³⁷⁵ To the extent that a U.S.-China conflict were to involve a conventional air and naval contest along China's periphery, however, the conflict might be less destructive than other great power wars we have seen in the past.

Technology and incentives to avoid provoking a larger adversary coalition: The availability of precision munitions among great powers, combined with the perceived need to court international public and elite opinion in conflicts whose outcome depended in part on third-party political support, led us to assess that targeting decisions on both sides were likely to be relatively careful and that, although mistakes would certainly be made, the focus of all parties would be on degrading adversary military capabilities rather than on staging kinetic attacks on population centers. Compared with other powers, Russian military concepts have relied more on area than on precision fires, but even Russia appears to be moving in that direction. A great power war of any kind will be destructive, but the possibility of provoking a larger adversary coalition will give all great powers an incentive to be more cautious about the destruction they cause.

Political and Strategic Consequences of Wars Also Limited by Historical Standards

One key finding from our hypothetical scenarios was a negative one: We could not envision a plausible scenario—having excluded strategic nuclear exchange—in which the United States would so thoroughly defeat China or Russia that either would lose its great power status. Although we did generate scenarios in which China or Russia was soundly defeated in military terms, their strategic nuclear deterrents seemed to preclude a postwar scenario in which their power and status were so diminished that the United States and its allies could remake international or regional orders as they thought best. China seemed particularly likely to be an important international actor with substantial influence and with goals and interests that continued to differ widely from those of the United States. Thus, it appears not only plausible but probable that strategic competition between China and the United States would continue into the aftermath of even an intense, lengthy war between them.

³⁷⁵ For example, in the midst of a collapse of the North Korean regime, the United States and China could have competing approaches to securing North Korean nuclear weapons. With the two sides in close contact near China's periphery, mistrust and misperception could lead to direct conflict between the two countries.

As a result, postwar changes were also more limited, certainly in comparison with such era-ending conflicts as the two World Wars or the Napoleonic wars. The aftermath of a great power war appears more likely to bring an evolution than a revolution in global or regional strategic dynamics. The most impactful scenario (China conquers Taiwan) did have substantial consequences—leading to the emergence of an Asian multilateral security arrangement—but overall the consequences from our scenarios are historically more similar to middle-tier conflicts, such as the Franco-Prussian or Korean wars.

This difficulty in fundamentally shifting international power dynamics in the nuclear age is likely to be reflected in the relative continuity of the international order. International orders are often constructed, or reconstructed, in the aftermath of major wars to reflect the new balance of power and preferences of the victorious states. Absent a crushing defeat, however, it seems unlikely that either side would be able to impose either a new or a renewed international system to fit their preferences. Both the United States and China, for example, would remain powerful international stakeholders in the aftermath of any of our scenarios, and they would likely persist in most of their areas of agreement and disagreement regarding the current international system. Absent a postwar settlement addressing fundamental differences between the two sides, war would likely heighten disagreements and make cooperation more difficult. A postwar order might ultimately be more bifurcated and fractured as competing blocs emerged. At best, this would mean a world of “muddling along” or modest evolution within existing frameworks.

Allied Contributions Might Vary and Could Change During a War

For each of our hypothetical scenarios, we considered factors that would affect key decisions by U.S. allies and partners about whether and how to contribute to a U.S.-led war against another great power. As with any major foreign policy decision, we expect that allies would grapple with competing considerations, such as a desire to sustain a relationship with the United States or to balance against aggression and the prospect of retaliation by Russia or China. In some cases, it is unclear what factor would weigh most heavily. But this analysis clearly showed plausible reasons why U.S. allies and partners might decide not to support a U.S.-led war against Russia or China, make different contributions depending on the scenario, or even change positions throughout a war. These variations might be more common in Asia, where the United States has many defense commitments but where U.S. allies and partners do not have reciprocal commitments. However, we found reasons to expect that NATO allies’ contributions to the defense of one another also could vary.

Our analysis of how individual countries might respond in hypothetical future scenarios is consistent with historical assessments of trends in U.S. ability to gain access during contingencies. Our findings reinforce earlier recommendations to develop multiple basing options for key contingencies.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁶ See, in particular, Pettyjohn and Kavanagh, 2016.

Existing U.S. Alliances Assessed to Be Highly Fragile or Contingent Under Stress of War

In our scenarios, we assessed that it was plausible that many U.S. treaty allies would not contribute substantially to U.S. war efforts. More common was a desire not to get involved and thus avoid being the focus of retaliatory strikes, instead getting a “free ride” off of the United States and a handful of more-committed partners. We did not predict a complete dissolution of NATO or key alliances (such as those with Japan), but we did analyze scenarios in which the conflict aftermath involved NATO becoming a shell of its former self, persisting in name only. We also conceived scenarios in Asia in which other allies, such as Thailand, formally renounced ties to the United States.

The loss of access to allied countries could present new operational changes for the joint force. For example, it would be more difficult to plan for and employ USAF concepts for distributed air operations without reliable access. Loss of access would also raise questions about allied willingness to accept proposed deployment of intermediate range ballistic missiles or to allow missile use from allied territory in the event of war.

Questions about alliance reliability are not new. However, these scenarios offered an opportunity to consider allied decisionmaking in a variety of contexts. In each case, there were plausible reasons to expect that at least some U.S. allies would not participate. This analysis therefore reinforces the importance of examining whether U.S. plans are robust to variations in allied support.

Great Power War Would Likely Sharpen U.S. Focus on Indo-Pacific Theater

A great power war, in any theater and regardless of outcome, would be costly for the United States, forcing it to set priorities as it rebuilds. The U.S. Department of Defense would need to refill spent arsenals, replace lost personnel and equipment, and repair damaged facilities and systems. In addition to the costs of such programs, rebuilding would take time, leaving a smaller and exhausted force with which to defend global U.S. interests. The United States could decide to reduce its global role after such a war, or it could double down on its role as global leader. In either case, decisions would have to be made regarding how to prioritize limited resources.

In this context, we expect that the United States would prioritize the most significant potential threat to its interests. Absent a significant change in strategy, the United States would likely focus on the most capable near-peer competitor, which is China. A U.S. focus on China after a war in Asia would be unsurprising: Such a war might heighten U.S. concerns about China’s ambitions or capabilities. Even if China were defeated, it would have significant capability to rebuild (as discussed in Chapter 2).

Even in the aftermath of a war with Russia, the United States could, counterintuitively, prioritize the Indo-Pacific. After a major war in Europe, Russia would likely struggle with rebuilding its military because of internal economic problems, a relatively weak economy, and

likely continued restrictions on access to Western investment and capital—in turn, the United States might thus believe it could sustain its advantages over Russia fairly easily. Moreover, wealthy and capable U.S. allies in Europe are better able to balance against Russia than U.S. allies in Asia are to balance against China. As a result, U.S. presence is arguably more important in the Pacific, particularly for air forces.³⁷⁷ Finally, and most importantly, China is a significantly more capable state than Russia, meaning it has far more ability to threaten U.S. interests both in the Pacific and globally, even if weakened.

The United States would likely reduce its presence in the Middle East following a costly great power war as well. NSS and NDS documents cite limited resources and less vital U.S. interests in that region in calling for a reduced U.S. role. A great power war would likely accelerate this trend.

Wartime Victory Might Not Translate into Favorable Postwar Environment

Our examination of historical great power wars and our hypothetical war scenarios revealed that the postwar environment can develop in unfavorable ways even for states that achieve wartime victory. Great power wars can be costly for all parties, including the victor, because of both military losses and economic disruption, and there are several less obvious costs that victors also might have to face.

Victor Will Be Weaker Relative to States That Were Not Party to the Conflict

Even the victor in a great power war will have taken significant military losses and therefore be weakened relative to countries that did not participate in the conflict. Winning a war with China, for example, would deplete fungible U.S. resources, such as fifth-generation aircraft, that would also be needed in a conflict against Russia. Although we do not anticipate that either country would pursue opportunistic aggression simply because of U.S. losses, the United States could find itself less prepared for a war that occurs for other reasons; therefore, it would also be less able to coerce the other power. This risk for the United States is likely to be exacerbated by the fact that neither Russia nor China would be likely to intervene in a limited war between the other and the United States: Each has its own security concerns regarding the other, and each would be disinclined to become a target of U.S. retaliatory strikes.³⁷⁸ As a result, the aftermath of any U.S. war with Russia or China is more likely to find the United States comparatively weakened in its competition with the other, win or lose.

³⁷⁷ It should be noted that this U.S. prioritization might not prove to be wise. In our scenario in Chapter 5, tensions in Eastern Europe are notably rising once again by 2030. These tensions are driven by changes in state behavior, such as Poland's pursuit of a nuclear weapon and shift further toward authoritarianism, that occur partly because of the more limited U.S. role in the region. These dynamics need not necessarily occur in the aftermath of a NATO-Russia conflict, but they are plausible.

³⁷⁸ We do explore a scenario in which such an intervention does occur when Russia becomes concerned about the implications of a dramatic Chinese defeat (see Chapter 3).

Victors Might Face Stronger Balancing Coalitions

After a U.S. victory, China and Russia might find new reasons to overcome their differences and deepen their economic and military ties. Similarly, in the aftermath of a Chinese victory, we anticipate that more countries in Asia would align more closely with the United States rather than continuing to hedge. In both cases, our expectation rests on the historical tendency of states to balance against threats rather than to bandwagon with known or potential aggressors. Contemporary behavior by countries in Asia is also consistent with this trend.

Victors Might Face Domestic Costs

As we described in the Taiwan scenario in Chapter 2, even if China were to win a major victory that could generate strong support for the CCP, it might still face greater domestic unrest in the years that follow. A war could divert resources away from domestic priorities and from repression. The economic disruptions of a war could also create hardships on civilian populations that undermine the regime's legitimacy and that drive discontent. The regime might be able to control these tensions (as we explore in the East China Sea scenario in Chapter 3), but it is also plausible that such a great power war could be deeply destabilizing (as we describe in the aftermath of the Russia misperception scenario in Chapter 5).

Risk of Conflict Recurrence Might Be High Even After Victory

Political science research suggests that, all things being equal, wars that end in decisive outcomes are less likely to recur. However, there are many factors, such as settlement terms and domestic political changes, that can contribute to conflict recurrence. For example, the punitive terms placed on Germany after World War I contributed to the rise of Nazism in Germany and the outbreak of World War II in Europe. We explore such an outcome in Chapter 3, describing how a decisive U.S. victory over China radicalizes the population, heightens insecurity, and fuels a competitive spiral that increases the risk of future conflict.

U.S. Victory over Russia or China and Incentives for a China-Russia Balancing Coalition

China and Russia have had a shared interest for many years in balancing against the United States and limiting U.S. influence over world events. However, mutual mistrust and disputes between them have prevented deeper military integration or the creation of a formal alliance. As we detail in Chapter 3, it is plausible that Russia or China would overcome these differences and fight together if one of the two appeared vulnerable to a massive defeat that upset their collective ability to balance against the United States. Even if they do not fight together in wartime, the two countries could have new incentives to overcome these differences after a great power war.

As Moscow or Beijing emerge from a losing war, either might view partnering with the other as the best way to deter a U.S. attack or U.S. opportunism during a rebuilding phase. The noninvolved (or less involved) state also might see the United States as more threatening after a

war. For example, Russia or China might assess that U.S. wartime behavior revealed wider U.S. ambitions or greater willingness to escalate than previously believed. These countries also might worry that victory could embolden the United States to undertake another war or to press other foreign policy aims through coercion. Russia and China also might see benefits to deeper economic cooperation after a war with the United States, or they could become more interested in developing economic ties that are less vulnerable to a U.S. blockade or U.S.-led sanctions.

A stronger Russia-China alignment is not a certainty after either a U.S. victory or defeat. For example, in the scenario in which China successfully conquers Taiwan (Chapter 2), we explore the possibility that the United States works to resolve its disputes with Russia and draws down in Europe to focus on the Indo-Pacific. However, if the United States emerges from a great power war locked into competition with both powers and commitments in both theaters, a Russia-China alignment would strain the U.S. military. This outcome would be a particular challenge for the USAF, which has a central role in conflicts in both theaters.

Postwar Alliance Cohesion Not Guaranteed Even After Allied Victory

Drawing on the close relationships that formed among the United States and its Western European allies after World War II, it's easy to imagine how fighting together can strengthen bonds among allies. Heightened threat perceptions toward the adversary after a war and the demonstration of an ally's willingness to fight together can strengthen an alliance. However, as the postwar mistrust between the United States and the Soviet Union after 1945 showed, wartime alliances do not always last in postwar periods.

In each of our scenarios, we identified potential sources of tension among allies on how to fight, such as divergent war aims and disagreements about actions that risk escalation. Resentment over differences in wartime contributions can also drive allies apart. Even after an allied victory, such tensions could undermine alliance cohesion. For example, in one scenario (Chapter 5), we imagine that wartime disagreements lead to postwar loss of U.S. access in Germany. In this case, a sense that the United States was more risk-acceptant than Germany led Germany to assess the U.S. troop presence was too risky to sustain.

Even among allies with a strong postwar relationship, new sources of tension could emerge if states react differently to the postwar environment. For example, we explore the possibility that some states pursue nuclear weapons programs in a postwar setting, creating tensions with allies who see such moves as provocative toward the adversary and contrary to global norms.

This is not to say that alliances always emerge from war less cohesive. We explored strengthened U.S. alliances following war with China (Chapter 2). Still, the plausibility of postwar alliance discord suggests the importance of how U.S. wartime relations with allies could affect postwar goals.

Incentives for U.S. Allies and Partners to Acquire Nuclear Weapons After Great Power War

Each of our hypothetical wars signaled the end of a lengthy period of great power peace and suggested the limits of deterrence in maintaining international stability. We assessed that this would increase many U.S. allies' and partners' security concerns and, in some cases, their skepticism regarding U.S. willingness or ability to uphold its historical extended deterrence guarantees. We further assessed that some of these states—seeking to hedge against the United States becoming less willing or able to uphold its extended deterrence guarantees in the future—might choose to acquire nuclear weapons or at least start (or restart) nuclear weapons programs. After a great power war, the United States also might feel a need for its allies to provide more for their own defense; therefore, the United States could take a more permissive view on nuclear proliferation than in the past.

Recommendations

The analysis in this report allows the reader to explore plausible future scenarios with potentially vital implications for U.S. security. Some of these scenarios highlighted weaknesses or limitations in U.S. policies and assumptions that could be challenged in future war scenarios. Although our analysis was not designed to assess the probability that these potentially incorrect assumptions or policies will lead to costs for the United States, it does demonstrate the plausibility of such concerns and, therefore, suggests that the United States should consider steps to address them.

U.S. War Plans and Postwar U.S. Strategic Goals

Existing joint planning doctrine provides a process for developing military plans that support U.S. strategic goals. Doctrine also recommends that leaders and planners be explicit about their assumptions, use red teams to probe them, generate and compare alternative courses of action, and identify sources of risk in a plan.³⁷⁹ If planners and decisionmakers follow this guidance, they should avoid some of the decisionmaking pitfalls that have preceded past great power wars. But given how often prewar predictions have been proven wrong, decisionmakers and planners might want to engage in additional analysis as they assess plans.

As a starting point, planners could analyze the postwar consequences associated with a war that goes according to their expectations during the conflict itself. Both our historical and hypothetical scenario analyses found that wartime victors should not count on a favorable postwar environment. By analyzing a best-case scenario in which their conflict planning assumptions hold, planners might be able to identify aspects of a plan that could undermine longer-term U.S. objectives. This type of analysis also could help decisionmakers explore

³⁷⁹ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0, Washington, D.C., June 16, 2017.

possible tensions between their short- and long-term postwar goals. Postwar analysis that goes into greater detail also might help policymakers evaluate whether a use of force—even one that is likely to end in victory—would serve U.S. interests in the years that follow.

Importantly, such analysis should consider that, even after a wartime defeat, China and Russia should be expected to remain important international players (absent a sustained strategic nuclear exchange). For example, as we discussed in Chapter 3, a defeated China could develop deeper grievances and insecurities that drive rapid postwar rearmament and increase the risks of another war. Therefore, any postwar analysis should consider how the new strategic environment would affect Russia's and China's concerns and ambitions and, ultimately, U.S. ability to achieve objectives.

Wargame Set After a Great Power War

The services and the joint force conduct games that consider how new concepts and systems would fare in a future war.³⁸⁰ Setting a futures game after a great power war would offer a different strategic environment within which to evaluate operational choices. Moreover, after a great power war, the United States might consider a different mix of legacy systems. Placing a game in such a setting would allow the USAF to evaluate whether a program is robust under assumptions about the future—including expected contingencies and posture—that differ from what the United States faces today. That said, great power wars are rare, meaning that such a setting would not be among the most-representative environments and therefore should be considered against alternative strategic settings. Therefore, smaller-scale games might be a better venue than large, infrequent events for such explorations.

Understanding and Education Among U.S. and Allied Decisionmakers Regarding Strategic and Operational Implications of Nuclear Weapon Use

Several of our scenarios highlighted the plausibility of nuclear use by U.S. adversaries in a great power war, particularly if the conflict involved Russia. The use, or even threatened use, of nuclear weapons in such a conflict would require U.S. leaders to make several decisions, likely in rapid succession, that could determine the outcome of not only the war but also national survival. However, the employment and aftermath of nuclear weapons use have generally been deemphasized in U.S. policymaking since the end of the Cold War. Relatively few wargames involve the use of nuclear weapons as a war-fighting tool. The current generation of U.S. policymakers might be less familiar with such issues as U.S. nuclear deterrence policy and the related policies of U.S. adversaries and might therefore have more difficulty making decisions quickly in a crisis to appropriately manage escalation risks. U.S. and allied decisionmakers should be fully briefed and educated about the potential operational and strategic consequences of nuclear use by the United States or its adversaries; they also should consider, in advance,

³⁸⁰ See, for example, the USAF futures games (“Air Force Wargame Results,” Military.com, 2018).

potential responses that could reduce the risk of surprise or reacting without proper forethought in the (hopefully unlikely) event that they are forced to confront such a scenario.

Final Thoughts

War is always fraught with uncertainty, and that cannot be entirely overcome by prewar analysis. But the history of decisionmaking prior to past great power wars suggests that at least some errors are avoidable. As Volume 2 details, racism, hubris, and a variety of other avoidable decisionmaking pathologies have contributed to wartime choices that wasted resources, lost lives, or led to defeat.³⁸¹ The history of incorrect predictions and failures to consider the potential results of events not proceeding according to plan is a reminder of the importance of constantly examining assumptions and alternative possibilities.

³⁸¹ Evans, 2023.

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The U.S. Department of Defense has been increasingly focused on competition with Russia and China and, in the extreme, the possibility of great power war. To inform thinking about what might follow such a war, RAND researchers generated four hypothetical near-term great power war scenarios and assessed how the postwar strategic environment would change in each scenario. These scenarios offer planners and decisionmakers plausible narratives about future great power wars with different features to help them examine assumptions and think about how wartime choices could affect postwar U.S. objectives.

The scenarios in this report illustrate the complex relationships between wartime and postwar goals. They show how a U.S. victory could provoke a stronger alignment between China and Russia or lead to greater determination and hostility in the recently defeated adversary. A U.S. defeat, meanwhile, could enhance U.S. efforts to recruit allies and partners, while also increasing the likelihood of nuclear proliferation among U.S. allies and partners. Indeterminate war outcomes could heighten the risk of a quick return to conflict while sapping alliance cohesion. The complexity and variability of these results highlight the importance for U.S. policymakers of considering postwar outcomes in prewar planning.

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