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14. ABSTRACT This essay argues that the conventional assumption that the PRC is sequencing its strategy is wrong and that Beijing is actually pursuing a cumulative strategy of slow, persistent, contemporaneous military expansion across the South Pacific. Alarming, this expansion already mirrors what Japan had at the height of its dominance in the Pacific War. A strategy of denial for Taiwan, while necessary to fight the PRC's cumulative strategy in the Pacific, is not sufficient to contain the PRC or prevent conflict with the U.S. This is because cumulative PRC political, economic, and military expansion in the South Pacific gives Beijing its option of when and where to exert military pressure, not limited to Taiwan. As a result, the U.S. strategy of denial is mismatched with PRC strategy and is ill prepared to counter it. The U.S. should revise its military strategy for the PRC by shifting from a strategy of denial to a strategy of recapture using the full spectrum of national power, including military power if necessary, before the costs become too great.					
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PLAYING THE WRONG GAME:
WHY A STRATEGY OF DENIAL FOR TAIWAN IS NOT ENOUGH
AND WHAT THE UNITED STATES CAN DO ABOUT IT

The contents of this paper are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

I. Introduction.

U.S. grand strategy toward China is built on a policy of containment and a strategy of denial, based on the assumption that denying the People's Republic of China (PRC) the ability to take Taiwan by force will prevent a cascading military crisis of PRC military expansion in the Pacific and conflict with the United States (Colby, "The United States Should Defend Taiwan"). This strategy of denial assumes that the PRC is pursuing a sequential strategy of military conquest, starting with Taiwan and moving on to other territorial claims step-by-step (Colby, *The Strategy of Denial* 116).

This essay argues that the conventional assumption that the PRC is sequencing its strategy is wrong and that Beijing is actually pursuing a cumulative strategy of slow, persistent, contemporaneous military expansion across the South Pacific. Alarming, this expansion already mirrors what Japan had at the height of its dominance in the Pacific War (Crowl 4).

A strategy of denial for Taiwan, while necessary to fight the PRC's cumulative strategy in the Pacific, is not sufficient to contain the PRC or prevent conflict with the U.S. This is because cumulative PRC political, economic, and military expansion in the South Pacific gives Beijing its option of when and where to exert military pressure, not limited to Taiwan. As a result, the U.S. strategy of denial is mismatched with PRC strategy and is ill prepared to counter it.

To do as Sun Tzu instructs and attack the enemy's strategy (Griffith 77; Handel 53-63), the U.S. should revise its military strategy for the PRC by shifting from a strategy of denial to a strategy of recapture using the full spectrum of national power, including military power if necessary, before the costs become too great.

Although all instruments of national power will be needed to counter the PRC's cumulative strategy in the Pacific, this essay focuses on the military dimension, arguing that the United

States needs to build a military plan that goes beyond just a strategy of denial. In order to demonstrate the scale of the problem posed by the PRC's cumulative strategy across vital South Pacific island chains, and the need to get ahead of it now, this essay will draw on the U.S. experience during the Pacific War and its interwar planning document War Plan Orange as a guide.

II. History leads to policy – a perfect storm for China's rise.

The President of the United States stood on the stage of the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, side by side with the Premier of the People's Republic of China, to address the Chinese Communist Party and laud it for its great success over the previous decade. The stage was ostentatiously large, beige and brown with a retro feel, striking an austere but powerful revolutionary image. The smallness of the President and the Premier under the grandiosity of the stage made them look like humble political equals, mere servants of the greater cause embodied by the Great Hall itself. The outsized American and PRC flags hung next to each other behind the President and the Premier, the PRC flag slightly higher than the American.

It was February 21, 1972, and President Nixon was visiting Beijing to broker an end to the PRC's non-engagement policy in large part to drive a wedge between China and the Soviet Union (Kissinger 262-63). This visit set in motion a U.S.-China policy, memorialized seven years later in the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations. This policy was built on the hopeful assumption that the PRC would ascend peacefully within the Bretton Woods world order, eventually see the value of free society, prefer it to despotic communism, and adopt the principles of capitalism, free markets, and democracy (Pillsbury 7-12).

Nixon thought that the PRC would want what the U.S. was selling. It is now clear that the PRC did not (Pillsbury 52-56). Instead, the PRC's party leaders wanted to reap the benefits of

their bloody investment in the Cultural Revolution when they expropriated unspeakable wealth from China's free landowning class. To reap these benefits, the PRC needed to commit to a way of doing business that was, and is, simply incompatible with the Western way: communism, cartelized industry, controlled economy, one-party rule, no civil rights or freedom of the press, mercantilism, information control, and successive strong men to uphold (and benefit from) all of the above. The bloodshed that underwrote such a system was not something the winners could simply walk away from just because a foreign power offered them trade on favorable terms. The PRC was, and remains, fully committed to its view of the world (Doshi 25-44).

III. Policy leads to a strategy of denial – checking the assumptions.

Over the last 50 years, China has become an aggressive military and economic power that seeks to displace the primacy of the United States and revise the international order to suit its worldview and interests (Doshi 19, 299-301). Far from joining team global democracy, the PRC is preparing to solidify its primacy through military force against Taiwan, the stronghold of democracy in the Pacific (Yoshihara, Holmes 295-96; Aquilino 6).

As U.S. strategists and planners worked to catch up with the China problem staring in the early 2000s, U.S. policy finally departed from Nixon's policy of encouraging China's growth and participation in the global order to one of containment, starting with the Obama Administration's "pivot to Asia" (Collinson). U.S. containment policy in turn relies on a strategy of denying PRC military conquest of Taiwan as the central means to deter PRC military expansion in the Pacific. The strategy of denial holds that if the U.S. and its allies protect Taiwan, the PRC will be unable to expand militarily and pursue its other interests in the Pacific because a costly campaign in Taiwan will sap the PRC's resources, making further expansion infeasible (Colby, *The Strategy of Denial* 150-70).

The U.S. strategy of denial rests on the incorrect assumption that the PRC is using a sequential military strategy for Pacific dominance. It is not. The PRC is using a cumulative strategy of military, economic, and diplomatic expansion, and a sequential denial strategy is not enough to stop it. To attack the PRC's strategy, U.S. military planners need to both defend Taiwan and prepare for a bigger whole-of-government fight to retake PRC strategic gains elsewhere, particularly in the South Pacific.¹

IV. To attack the enemy's strategy, the U.S. has to be playing the right game.

Is the U.S. playing dominoes, chess, or weiqi,² the 2,500-year-old Chinese game of encirclement? In *Reflections on the War in the Pacific* (1952), military strategist and U.S. Navy Admiral Joseph Wylie differentiates between sequential and cumulative strategies (59). Sequential strategy consists of a step-by-step linear conquest progressing from one point to another into a single decisive battle that ends in military victory. Cumulative strategy is defined by multiple small and otherwise unrelated campaigns, indecisive on their own, but whose individual successes accumulate into military victory.

A strategy of denial works well if an adversary is planning a sequential campaign. By denying any key operation in the sequence, planners can stop an adversary's advance toward decisive victory. However, a denial strategy does not necessarily work if an adversary is planning a cumulative campaign. Even if an offensive stops one operation in that campaign, the adversary can still advance through multiple other operations in play.

Here is what the PRC's cumulative strategy of military expansion in the Pacific looks like to date. In 2014, shortly after completing its first artificial features in the South China Sea, the PRC

¹ While this essay looks only at the Pacific, the PRC's cumulative gains are global and include political coercion, tech control with Huawei 5G, debt-trap diplomacy, and belt and road projects from South America, to Africa, to Greenland.

² Also known as Go.

shifted focus to militarizing the South Pacific (Wu et al.) The PRC has since made inroads in the strategically vital Solomon Islands³ with belt and road projects in pursuit of an agreement to allow PRC warships to station there (Liu). An advisor for President Biden warned recently that the U.S. is losing influence over the islands to China (Wang, Razdan). In Fiji, the ruling junta forged diplomatic ties with the PRC, which also secured military basing rights with Fiji, New Guinea, and Vanuatu (Wyeth, Stunkel; Gray).

Extending beyond these clear-cut military projects, the PRC is using gray-zone tactics to spread coercive political influence in exchange for political and military concessions (Dutton). In Samoa, China is building a port (Handley, Seselja) where it could station warships or else threaten to weaponize its infamous industrialized fishing fleet that the PRC has used to raze food sources of coastal countries. In 2019, Kiribati and Micronesia ended diplomatic relations with Taiwan in a show of PRC dominance in the region (Cottle). Kiribati and Micronesia have two of the most expansive exclusive economic zones in the world that are of great strategic and economic interest to the PRC. In Tonga, a chain of 170 islands also with an expansive exclusive economic zone, the PRC has cornered the nation's vital vanilla industry, which it can use to leverage political concessions like military access (Luthi).

Although hard to visualize, and perhaps difficult for some Americans to place on a map, these islands represent geostrategic locations that are necessary for the U.S. to maintain the defense posture in the Pacific that it established in World War II. String together the PRC's expansion in the South Pacific and two things become clear. First, superimpose PRC military presence in the South Pacific on a campaign map showing what a U.S. military defense of Taiwan would look like and it is clear that the PRC is militarizing the southern flank of the Pacific from which it

³ For an understanding of why the Solomon Islands are strategically vital see "A Pivotal Campaign in a Peripheral Theater: Guadalcanal and World War II in the Pacific" by Bradford A. Lee.

could attack U.S. forces sailing west from the United States in aid of Taiwan. Second, the PRC is already entrenched economically, diplomatically, and militarily in strategically vital islands that the Japanese did not even have control of until after Pearl Harbor. Superimpose these gains over any campaign map from the Pacific War and the problem is clear. The bloody toll to recapture these islands from the Japanese should be first in U.S. planners' minds and should inform a whole-of-government recapture strategy before military recapture becomes the only option.

This picture does not need to speak a thousand words – just a few should suffice: while U.S. planners have been hyper-focused on Taiwan, sweating over tight control of a single domino, the PRC furtively has oozed out across the Pacific and encircled the southern flank of the U.S. Pacific defense perimeter. A strategy of denial does not work against a furtive ooze any more than placing a domino on a weiqi board stops the other player from encircling the domino. The U.S. has been playing the wrong game.

V. Real life is living history.

The U.S. has been here before. As mentioned, the PRC has already bloodlessly gained in coercive influence what Japan had conquered by force only after attacking on Pearl Harbor (Crowl 4). The difference is that the PRC has moved in quietly and slowly, through subversive economic and political means (Cottle). The PRC did so without firing a shot, but that does not mean that dislodging the PRC will be any less costly than dislodging the Japanese in the Pacific War. Mark Twain purportedly said that history does not repeat itself but it rhymes. U.S. planners should study both the lead up to and the prosecution of the Pacific War because there are parallels to what is happening today. Put another way, there are only so many ways that an Asian maritime power can conquer the Pacific, and only so many ways to take it back. History can inform.

At the end of the 19th century, Japan was fending off multiple Western powers asserting their interests in the region but doing so at the end of their own logistical reach. Chief among these Western powers were the United States, Great Britain, and Russia. Japan's victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 called into question the Western powers' ability to hold their interests in the region, inspiring Japan to "seek imperium." A little more than a decade later, World War I sapped the West's resources and forced Western powers to deprioritize lines of effort in Asia. This new reality left a power vacuum that Japan began to fill, focusing on resource and land acquisition in China (Marston 16-22).

Japan's ascent in Asia led U.S. military strategists and planners to devise War Plan Orange, a series of plans from 1919 to 1938 that at first focused on containing Japan by using the U.S. position in the Philippines to deny Japanese military expansion. Initially, War Plan Orange was a strategy of denial not unlike where the U.S. is today with Taiwan: by maintaining a strong military presence in Manila, the U.S. thought it would deter Japan from taking any hasty action against U.S. interests in the region. (Miller 31; Hornbeck).

By the 1930s, Japan had not been contained by the U.S. presence in the Philippines in part because, like the PRC today, Japan was not pursuing a sequential strategy of expansion. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, Japan pursued a cumulative strategy to wrest from China what it needed to revitalize its economy, shore up supply lines and resources, and build its defense industrial base within its own interior lines of control. Only after these objectives were achieved would Japan use big guns and big ships to assert itself as the premier regional power over contested exterior lines of control (Marston 23-26; Paine 135).

As Japan grew through the 1920s and 1930s, U.S. planners realized that to keep up with the problem War Plan Orange needed to be revised to a recapture strategy based on three phases.

First, planners assumed that Japan, having accumulated the power to assert itself militarily, would likely take the Philippines by force and then conquer islands across the South Pacific in order to become the premier Pacific power. Second, U.S. forces would push west and establish forward bases of operations to commence phase three. Finally, U.S. forces would retake islands that Japan had seized in the first phase including the Philippines (Miller 31-35).

To keep up with the China problem today, U.S. planners should envision what a Pacific recapture strategy would look like. The PRC like Japan in the 1930s has benefited from a U.S. containment policy and denial strategy that is mismatched with the PRC's actual strategy. The PRC has pursued a cumulative strategy to militarize the South Pacific and dominate the theater. PRC military, economic, and diplomatic expansion in the South Pacific mirrors Japan's expansion in phase two of War Plan Orange. In fact, the PRC is much further along in its Pacific conquest than Japan was before it attacked Pearl Harbor. Although the PRC has done this bloodlessly, its military presence and influence in the region matches more closely to Japan's posture in the Pacific after it attacked Pearl Harbor. Therefore, the U.S. should see itself as already in phase two of War Plan Orange. In order for the U.S. to fight the PRC's strategy, the U.S. needs to revise and update its strategy of denial to a strategy of recapture using all instruments of national power, including a plan for military engagement if it becomes necessary.

VI. War Plan Red.

If other instruments of national power fail and the U.S. ends up in a military conflict with the PRC, the U.S. needs to have a plan in place to dislodge the PRC from the South Pacific and a force capable of carrying that plan out. U.S. national security strategy with respect to the PRC should be expanded to use all tools of national power – diplomacy, economics, international

partnerships, and military power if necessary – not to contain but to counter PRC influence in the South Pacific.

The White House and the Pentagon should prepare a defense budget for the next national defense strategy where modernization and “right-sizing” the force is tied to the strategy of fighting back against the PRC’s cumulative Pacific strategy. This budget will empower Congress to authorize and appropriate the right military programs, and it will send the right demand signal to the flagging U.S. national security industrial base to start ramping up old, and designing new, production lines and workforces to provide the defense articles that the U.S. would need if other instruments of national power fail. What this right-sized force should consist of is beyond the scope of this essay, but the Department of Defense and its services need to make clear to Congress what it would take to fight and win a larger scale Pacific military conflict. Whatever the specifics, it is time for the United States to begin rebuilding its military to pre-Global War on Terror levels. This means bigger defense budgets and a larger, higher tech military.

The national military strategy should likewise plan and prepare for a protracted military recapture campaign that accounts for the probability of having to retake strategically vital locations in the South Pacific that the U.S. fought for in World War II. This strategy should shift from seeing the Pacific in linear and sequential terms, and see it instead as a hard and non-permissive environment of distributed and cumulative PRC lethality.

Finally, the Joint Chiefs should envision a War Plan Red, a recapture campaign in the Pacific, understanding that the PRC already has entrenched military, political, and economic power projection capability in the region (Yoshihara, Holmes 150-69). Central to this plan, the Joint Chiefs should look beyond a strategy of denial for Taiwan and ask what military conflict in the

Pacific would look like if the PRC struck effectively first in some unexpected location far beyond Taiwan, and perhaps much closer to the United States.

VII. The seemingly contradictory relationship between deterrence and escalation – the U.S. must either remove war as the adversary’s BATNA or be ready to confront it.

Critics could argue that PRC expansion in the South Pacific is not like Japanese interwar expansion in the South Pacific because PRC gains are civil, diplomatic, and economic, not military. As a result, the U.S. planning and preparing for larger military conflict beyond Taiwan would be premature and escalatory. Such an escalation would signal a strategic and geopolitical shift of arguably historic proportion, as the U.S. would be unambiguously putting itself on a military conflict footing with the PRC. This is a legitimate criticism that deserves attention. Where one falls on the merits of this criticism depends on how one frames the problem.

First, even if PRC expansion in the South Pacific really was just diplomatic and economic, U.S. planners should still consider how much more entrenched Japan would have been, and bloodier the recapture, in the Pacific War if Japan enjoyed PRC levels of political influence and economic coercion in the region before it launched the military portion of its Pacific offensive. However, PRC expansion in the Pacific is decidedly not just diplomatic and economic. U.S. planners should not be fooled by the PRC’s tactic to use blurred lines between its civil, political, economic, and military apparatus to achieve military aims. The PRC has been clear about its intent to use gray-zone tactics and civil-military fusion as an extension of its military strategy to displace the U.S. in the Pacific (Dutton). If the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine tells planners anything, it is that when it comes to signaling revisionist military ambition, the U.S. has a right to take dictators at their word and to plan and prepare against it (Brands, Beckley125).

The next question is whether the United States can bolster its military position and plans in the Pacific without igniting a conflict. It can, so long as the U.S. maintains a clear military advantage over the PRC in the region. Military power projection is not a black and white zero sum game. It is an extension of a broader political process taking place between two states with military force as just one lever of influence.

Taken as a geopolitical whole, whether planners like it or not, the U.S. is in a negotiation with the PRC over who will have influence in the world. That negotiation is punctuated by the potential for conflict if the negotiation fails. In other words, the PRC could see military conflict with not just Taiwan, but with the United States, as its best alternative to a negotiated agreement, or BATNA, if negotiations fail. A credible military deterrent is not meant to alienate the adversary. It is meant to deter conflict by raising costs for the adversary. A credible military deterrent would strengthen the U.S. negotiating position and prevent military conflict from becoming the PRC's BATNA (Fisher, Ury 166).

In the worst-case scenario, the PRC has already decided that military conflict in the Pacific is its BATNA, in which case, the smart thing for the U.S. to do is prepare now (Brands, Beckley 125-37). Whether dissuading the PRC from opting for military conflict, or preparing for that as an inevitability, sound planning and military growth is the right course of action for the United States. The longer planners wait, the bloodier it will be to respond. The U.S. cannot let another 10 years go by while the PRC slowly uses gray-zone militarization to put itself in position for military conflict.

VIII. Conclusion.

From the day that President Nixon stood next to Zhou Enlai as tiny equals subsumed by the grand, overpowering beige and brown Great Hall of the People, U.S. China strategy has been one step behind, fundamentally missing the core design of PRC strategy. The U.S. strategy of containment by denying the PRC Taiwan is no different, missing the fundamental that the PRC is using a cumulative strategy of expansion.

Using history as a guide, when containment by denial fails recapture becomes necessary. The result of U.S. failure to contain Japan by denial during the Second Sino-Japanese War was the need for recapture in the Pacific War. The reality is that the modern strategy of denial with respect to Taiwan is not going to stop the PRC from militarizing the Pacific if it wants to.

If the U.S. learns from its last failed Pacific denial strategy and begins planning for its recapture campaign now, the U.S. can get ahead of the China problem and start mitigating costs before they spiral out of control. This must include a military planning component in the event that other instruments of power fail along with the strategy of denial. In that case, the U.S. needs to be ready to wage a potentially protracted conflict in the Pacific to retake what it lost just as the U.S. had planned to do in War Plan Orange.

Judging today's situation in the Pacific against the framework of War Plan Orange, the U.S. is already in phase two. It is time for the U.S. to catch up.

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