

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 13-05-2023		2. REPORT TYPE Final		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Red Versus Blue: The Joint Force Maritime Component Commander's (JFMCC) Efforts to Deter China's Global Influence			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Henry L. Sims Jr., USAF Advisor: Associate Professor John M. Sappenfield			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Maritime Advanced Warfighting School (MAWS) Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Director, Maritime Advanced Warfighting School (MAWS) 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) NPS CIVINS	
				11. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
12. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the Naval War College faculty in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the J...					
14. ABSTRACT Research Question: Can the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC) alone counter China's malign military presence outside of China's borders and immediate periphery? Thesis: To counter China's global influence, the JFMCC must explicitly integrate planning with the JFACC and JFLCC while also exploiting the cyber domain. Although sea control and sea denial have been key to some U.S. victories in war, maritime superiority now necessitates integrated planning in air, land, and cyber environments. Integrated planning in a multi-domain environment is					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 22	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Director, MAWS
a. REPORT U	b. ABSTRACT U	c. THIS PAGE U			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) 401-841-6149

Red Versus Blue:
The Joint Force Maritime Component Commander's (JFMCC)
Efforts to Deter China's Global Influence



Date Submitted: 13 MAY 2023

Word Count: 4,394

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College, Newport, RI in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of National Security Decision Making.

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Introduction

To counter China's global influence, the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC) must explicitly integrate planning with the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) and Joint Force Land Component Commander (JFLCC) while also exploiting the cyber domain. For instance, sea control efforts require air, land, and cyber support to complete maritime military objectives, and this will be pivotal to deterring China.¹ According to U.S. government officials, "The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tasked the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to develop the capability to project power outside China's borders and immediate periphery to secure the [People's Republic of China's (PRC)] growing overseas interests."² As a result, China's influence has grown exponentially in places such as Africa and South America.

Not only does China have a more extensive naval fleet, but "the vastness of the world's oceans makes it impossible for even a preeminent naval power to achieve global maritime superiority."³ Operation HUSKY taught valuable lessons on integrating amphibious assaults, naval firepower, and air interdiction. The invasion of Sicily would not have been successful if it relied solely on maritime forces. While sea control and sea denial within naval operations have been the staple of some past U.S. victories in war, maritime superiority necessitates concurrent dominance in the air, land, and cyber domains. Integrated planning in a multi-domain environment is required to deter China's global influence.

Background

The global influence of the U.S. and Europe is consistently outpaced by China's vicennial increase in global impact (See Figures 1 and 2). "Now, China is the leading power across most of sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia and is catching up to the U.S. in its own hemisphere."⁴ At

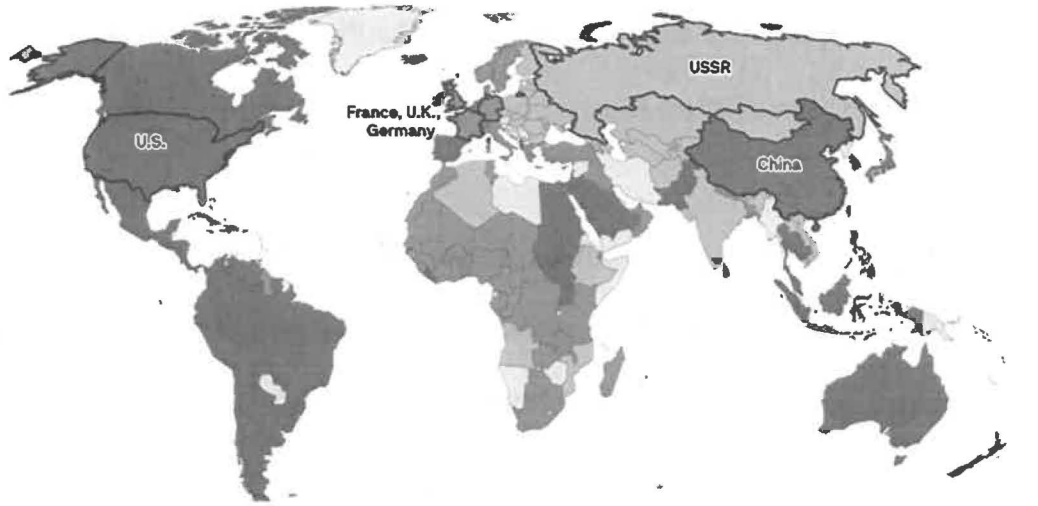
the current rate, China is on pace to become the most prominent global influence by 2040. The JFMCC has not been able to stop this influential spread with the current stovepipe efforts of the maritime component. Meanwhile, the PRC has effectively exploited the air domain with domestic balloon tactics and global airpower projection. The PRC has also increased its international land presence in other areas across the globe, placing China's forces closer to U.S. territory.

Further, China is currently the top culprit for cyber-attacks on the maritime transportation system (MTS). "Concerning the adversary customer behind MTS cyberattacks, China was first, followed by unknown cyber adversaries, then Russia, Iran, and Israel."⁵ China also has the advantage of preserving its naval assets by operating primarily as a Pacific maritime force. In contrast, the U.S. Navy is a global fighting force that strains manpower and resources. While exercises such as COBRA GOLD "fosters interoperability and contributes to operational readiness" with allies and partners, its focus is "humanitarian assistance and disaster relief" centered on naval coordination.⁶ Although exercise VALIANT SHIELD *does* provide joint training among friendly forces, its primary intent is to conduct sinking exercises (SINKEX) in the maritime environment.⁷ Since China's naval fleet size is superior to that of the U.S., the multi-domain spread of China's influence has been too much to counter for the JFMCC alone.

Countries with most influence on others, over time

Top influencer: ■ U.S. ■ China ■ Russia/USSR ■ France, U.K. or Germany

1980 2000 2020

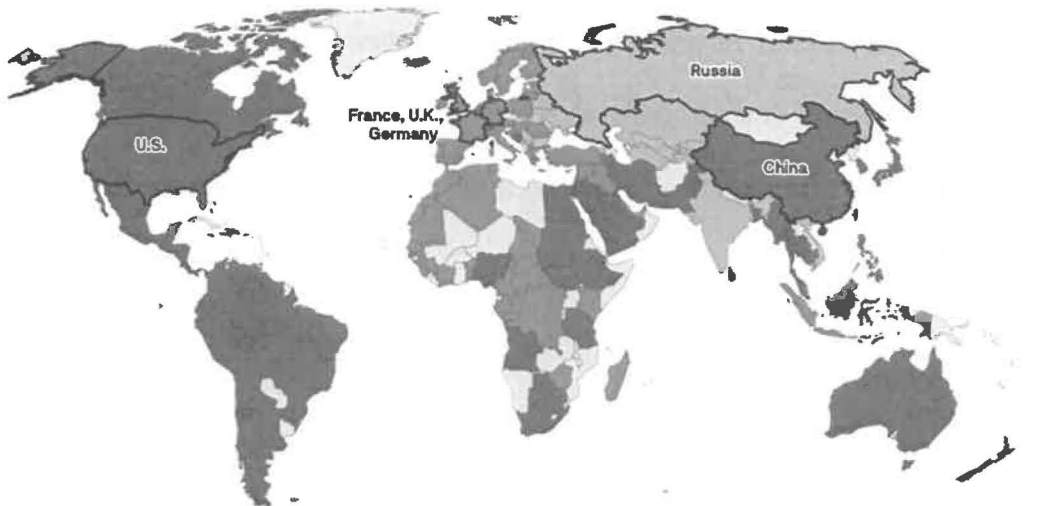


Data: [Atlantic Council](#); Map: Andrew Witherspoon/Axios

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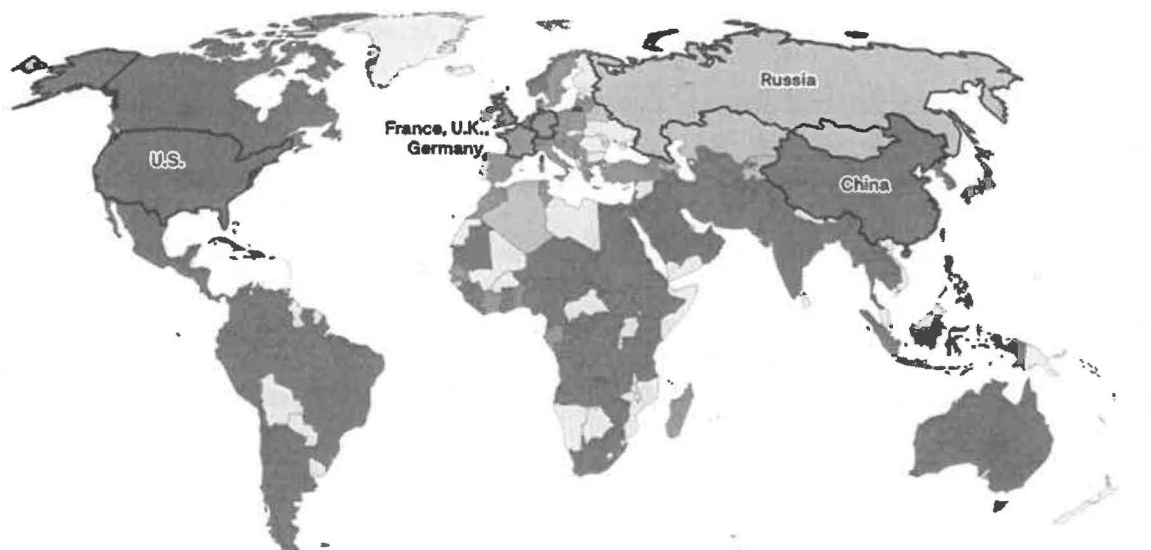
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Figure 1. Countries with the most influence on others over time. ⁸

Countries with most influence on others, over time

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Data: [Atlantic Council](#); Map: Andrew Witherspoon/Axios

Figure 2. Countries with the most influence on others over time.⁹

Controlling the Air Domain at Home and Abroad

Air superiority is vital to achieving sea control and sea denial. Therefore, the JFMCC should integrate planning efforts with the JFACC to counter the PRC's aggressive flying, shore-based airpower, balloon tactics, and increased naval and airpower production rates. These proactive steps will help deter China's sea presence in places such as the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Solomon Islands. China uses the air domain to capitalize on intelligence collection and boundary testing. The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has been the center of China's erratic behavior in disputed territory.

In 2021, the PLAAF flew near contested air between China and Malaysia. Although the valid reason for this flight path is difficult to determine, one can speculate that China attempted to

project power, collect intelligence, and test the capabilities of its transport aircraft.¹⁰ While China publicly denied entering Malaysian airspace, the Royal Malaysian Air Force radar confirmed the flight tracks of 16 aircraft, composed of Il-76 and Y-20 transports, that belonged to the PLAAF and approached within 60 nautical miles off the shore of Sarawak.¹¹ While posing a potential threat in international airspace is not illegal, flexing the PLAAF's airpower in the air domain disrupts national sovereignty, which the JFMCC cannot prevent without the JFACC.

With China's widespread influence, it is difficult to know when and where China will pose a threat to respond promptly. Shore-based airpower will likely be a tactic of choice for China. Their analysts have studied this technique from Midway, Guadalcanal, and Okinawa. "In a major conventional war against the [U.S], the PLA would employ shore-based aircraft to degrade or cripple American Airpower at sea and would hold at risk American carriers and their air wings."¹² Long-range airpower will be vital to enabling the capabilities of the maritime component. Without support from the JFACC, the JFMCC will be limited in its ability to prevent and counter China's shore-based firepower.

China's influence in the air domain occurs domestically as well as abroad. The recent balloon tactic devised by the PRC illustrated the need to rely on a multifaceted approach to counter aerial threats. The North American Aerospace Defense (NORAD) command identified and tracked the balloon, and the U.S. Air Force successfully shot it down. While the U.S. Navy recovered the balloon remnants at sea, these efforts were reactive. The JFMCC cannot proactively locate and destroy similar threats promptly. The U.S. must achieve air superiority to deter future attempts by adversaries to collect information via aerial means at home and abroad. China violated U.S. airspace with this balloon tactic. At a cheap cost, the loitering capability of China's high-altitude balloon enabled it to carry noteworthy intelligence collection equipment to identify Signals

Intelligence (SIGINT), electronic and microwave emissions, radar signals, and photographic data.¹³ While this was the first balloon to make international news, it was not the first time China used this method to collect data. Researchers said, "India was also among several countries in China's neighborhood to have been targeted."¹⁴ Balloon tactics are not new and have been used for intelligence collection in the Cold War and recon tactics in the Civil War. The Civil War was the first U.S. war fought simultaneously in the air, land, and sea. Innovation in aerial warfare was a trailblazer for its time, as it took place forty-two years before the invention of the airplane.¹⁵ Therefore, threats to the air are fortified in warfare. China's global influence spans beyond the impacts of conventional war and will require deterrence beyond the scope of the JFMCC. The U.S. never had to shoot down a threat over the continental U.S., but the PRC's balloon tactic demonstrated the need to think outside of stovepipe service functions. Joint force collaboration will be instrumental in countering similar threats.

Additionally, relying primarily on the maritime component could prove detrimental since China continues to grow its naval size (See Figure 3).¹⁶ With such a geographical separation and a large span of global control, the limited scope of the U.S. Naval fleet will not be able to counter all aerial threats. China's sizeable naval fleet and aircraft carrier presence could place the U.S. at a disadvantage, and U.S. Naval War College (NWC) professors warn in maritime warfare, the enormous fleet usually wins.¹⁷ It will take integration to win a war with China. "The world is entering a new age of warfare, one in which [partnership] will determine victory in conflict."¹⁸ The NWC is known for excellent sea power influencers and naval strategists. Yet, the NWC still recognizes that jointness and partnership with other services and domains are required to help ensure victory.¹⁹ Because air superiority is critical to deterring PRC

influence, the JFMCC should integrate planning with the JFACC to offset the imbalance of its inferior naval quantities.

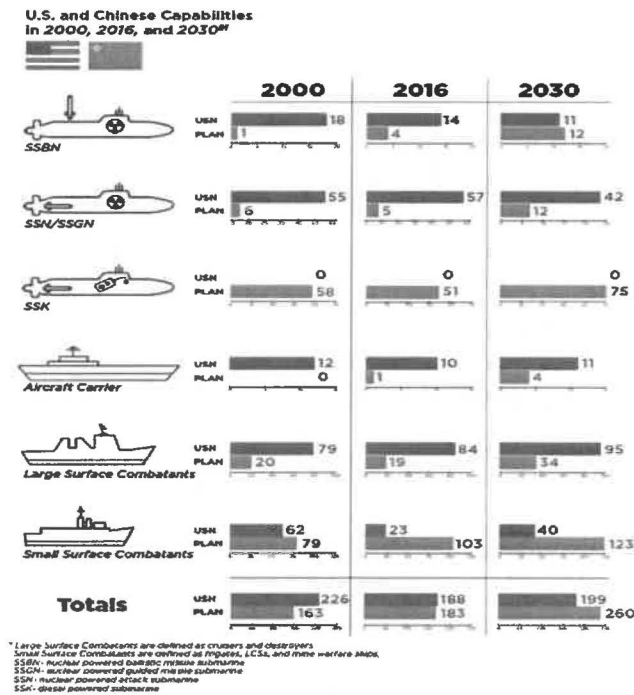


Figure 3. U.S. and Chinese Capabilities in 2000, 2016, and 2030²⁰

The air domain will be crucial since the U.S. Navy cannot match China's sea-based air capabilities. Between the J-10C, J-20, and J-16, the PLAAF has more than 600 aircraft. And within the last three years, yearly production rates of the J-16 and J-20 have almost doubled (See Figure 4).²¹ In March 2023, the Air Force released the Air Force Future Operating Concept (AFFOC) to advocate the need for joint synergies to counter aggression by strategic competitors. The National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Joint Warfighting Concept must span beyond words, and the air component "creates opportunities for the rest of the Joint Force to apply their strengths and stop the aggression. No service or force element operates alone, but in the face of the advanced threat, the Airmen open the door or kick it down."²² The battle with China will be an enduring fight. The AFFOC

highlights how the JFACC will enable the JFMCC to maintain dominance in conflict through sustainment and innovation to produce all-domain effects.

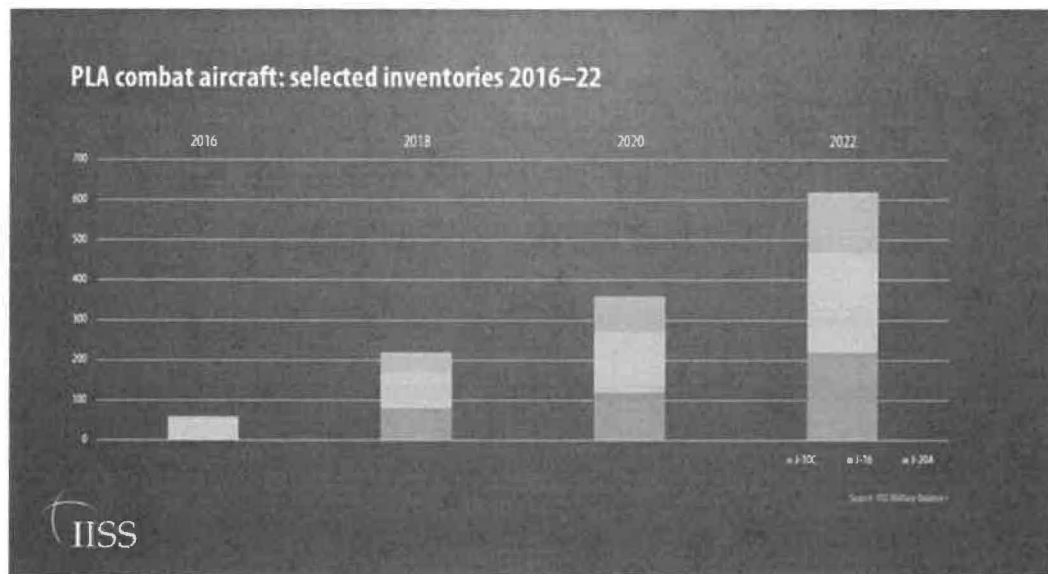


Figure 4. China's Air Force Modernization: gaining pace.²³

China is playing a game of chess, and its influence is intensified by its trans-oceanic presence and ability to influence other countries through trade and economics. With the JFMCC's smaller fleet, the air domain will be needed to help combat this threat.²⁴ China can use its expansion of global presence to exploit inferior countries, and the JFMCC alone cannot monitor every aspect of this threat.²⁵ It is unfeasible for the U.S. Navy to outmatch the world's largest naval fleet numerically. Therefore, the U.S. is already disadvantaged on the sea. "Both Chinese and outside naval experts speculate that the [People's Liberation Army-Navy] PLAN may have an Indian Ocean fleet in the near future."²⁶ Incorporating the air component into countersea operations is not a new concept. Air Force Policy Directive 3-04 needs to be reevaluated, and planners need to refresh on how to use air assets to conduct countersea operations.²⁷ Senior Air Force leaders say, "We will likely see more UAS strikes in the future against our forces [and this] challenges the

concepts of force protection, air defense, and air superiority and how we should respond."²⁸ Managing a two-ocean threat will require assets beyond the sea domain, and combatting China will require help from the JFACC.

Conquering the Land Domain

China also uses the land domain to expand its terrestrial boundaries, taking its influence beyond the sea. The JFMCC must integrate planning with the JFLCC to counter China's land influence in South America, Africa, and potentially Taiwan. For example, "sea control may require projecting power ashore to neutralize threats or control terrain in the landward portion of the littorals."²⁹ Therefore, the JFMCC must understand the PRC's power projection will span outside the Navy's area of responsibility. China's threat of global influence has direct ties to the land component and must be closely monitored. According to General Laura Richardson, commander of U.S. SOUTHCOM, "The PRC has expanded its ability to extract resources, establish port[s], manipulate governments through predatory investment practices, and build potential dual-use space facilities."³⁰ Since 2000, the PRC has seemingly outcompeted the U.S. regarding trade with other impressionable countries (See Figure 5).³¹ These steps enable China to slowly increase its land presence in areas surrounding the U.S. The JFMCC is limited in its ability to counter shore-based threats without support from the JFLCC.

First, projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will continue intensifying China's global land presence. Its steps to capitalize on soft power techniques challenge the military instrument of power. In fact, "Over the past two decades, China has developed close economic and security ties with many Latin American countries, including Brazil and Venezuela."³² These ties raise great global concern for the JFMCC since naval power cannot

deter these land influences. Increased trade partnerships with China could result in more land-based threats globally. Once the JFMCC projects initial power ashore by delivering forces supporting land operations, the hand-off should be transferred to the JFLCC to identify any hazards from China's influence ashore.



Figure 5. China overhauls the U.S. to become the region's biggest trading partner.³³

China's ability to spread its influence via the land domain is not getting as much global attention as it should. While the U.S. focuses on combatting China's growing dominance on the seas, China is working from other angles on land. This method is akin to a magician distracting its spectators by directing focus on the left hand when in all actuality, the manipulation is occurring in the right hand. For example, there is not much news coverage about the plans for China to build a nuclear reactor in Argentina nor its pledge to share atomic technology in the future (See Figure 6).³⁴ Preventing the spread of China's influence on land will require collaboration between the JFMCC and the JFLCC.



Figure 6. China is in talks with Argentina to build a new nuclear reactor and has pledged to share more nuclear technology with South America.³⁵

Regarding other land threats, Taiwan is also a significant concern for the U.S. and its allies, and "all fear that Beijing is using these relationships to pursue its geopolitical goals, including the further isolation of Taiwan, and to bolster authoritarian regimes."³⁶ China's advantage in the region is heightened by its ability to operate from interior lines of communication that will enable an attack on Taiwan with substantial reach-back to the home base. While the U.S. is capable of rapid mobility that can deploy forces at any place at any time, a response by U.S. naval forces may be too untimely if China were to establish a foothold on Taiwanese land. To prepare for such threats, integrated planning with the JFLCC will serve as crucial gap fillers for China's global influence on land.

Additionally, encroachment on U.S. territory is becoming more realistic, and our land neighbors seem to welcome adversarial threats into the neighborhood. It will require coordination with the JFLCC to counter land encroachment. China has also given indications of expanding its land presence in Africa. China has been vested in gaining influence in Africa for more than a decade. "Chinese investments in Africa have raised many

eyebrows, as competitors like the U.S. argue that it's motivated by Beijing's desire to exploit the continent's resources."³⁷ The desires of its leadership drive China's global land influence. In this case, President Xi has a crucial role in China's influence in Africa and will shape future Sino-African relations. "After nearly a decade in power, Chinese President Xi Jinping has secured an unmatched relationship with African countries since Mao Zedong, who fostered ties with newly independent governments in the 20th century. Xi's BRI has led to the construction of massive infrastructure projects across Africa."³⁸ General Townsend states, "The Chinese are outmaneuvering the U.S. in select African countries with port projects, economic endeavors, infrastructure, and their agreements and contracts will lead to greater access in the future" (See Figure 7).³⁹ Greater access to land means less dependency on the seas. Less dependency on the seas means less impact by the JFMCC. As China's land presence on the continent continues to increase, so must detailed integrated planning with the JFLCC.

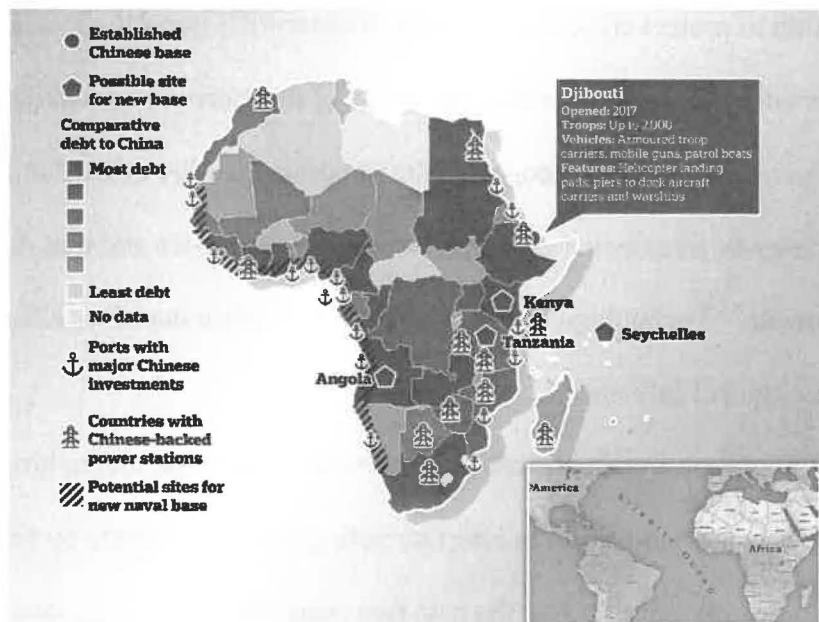


Figure 7. China has used cheap loans, construction projects, and purchases of key infrastructure to influence Africa and outcompete the U.S. Beijing has now built its first overseas military base in the region and is thought to be scouting a site for a second.⁴⁰

There is a large-scale land threat to the U.S. Asia is the largest continent in the world, and Africa is the second largest. Russia is the largest country in Asia, and China is the second largest. Combining the Chinese and Russian influence in Asia with the vastness of Asian, African, and South American land presence creates an alarming U.S. vulnerability. An economically weaker China is changing tack and wants to emphasize its political strength."⁴¹ These actions further support the need for concern regarding China's influence on land and the organization for and fundamentals of Joint Maritime Operations, including the ground and air components.⁴² The JFMCC cannot combat this critical land vulnerability with limited naval assets, which justifies the need for integrated sea, air, and land planning.

Deterrence in the Cyber Domain

The JFMCC must further exploit the cyber domain by incorporating Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) and automation to protect critical U.S. assets, counter PRC non-kinetic aggression, and defend in the information space. Wayne Hughes is one of the more prominent advocates for fleet tactics and naval operations but also recognizes the importance of the cyber domain. He highlighted technology as an essential cornerstone of maritime tactics and that A.I. would change how future fights occur.⁴³ Technological advancements will refine maritime efforts to prevent the spread of China's global influence.

First, the JFMCC cannot protect critical U.S. assets without modernizing how the Navy fights. China will likely use innovation to interfere with global sovereignty by targeting naval assets that depend on technology.⁴⁴ Over the past five years, the U.S. has become more vulnerable to cyberattacks (See Figure 8)⁴⁵. This threat illustrates the dire need for the JFMCC to effectively incorporate A.I. and automation into its naval tactics, techniques, and procedures. The

JFMCC cannot successfully deter China without practical cyber effects. "The ability to collect, analyze, and use intelligence information depends on cyberspace. USCYBERCOM staff has found that few adjustments are required to integrate cyberspace operations into existing planning and execution processes."⁴⁶ It is not enough to just admire the problem. The DoD acknowledges these cyber shortfalls, but rectification requires action today. One cannot win the race without running.

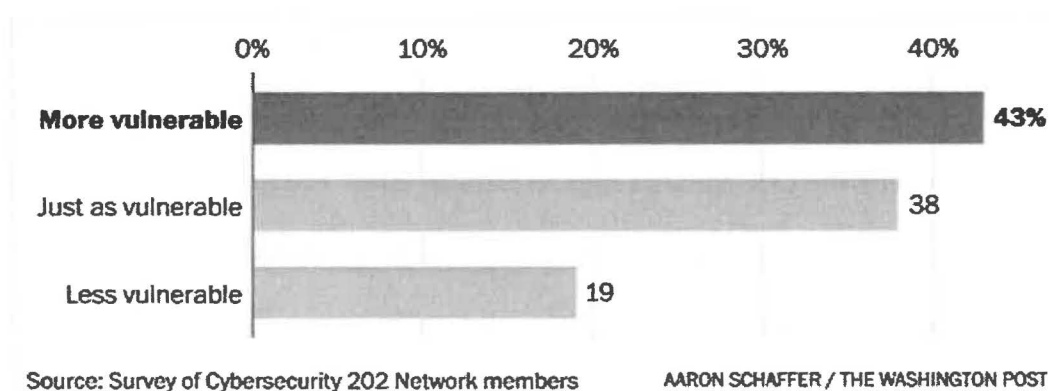


Figure 8. Is the U.S. more vulnerable, less vulnerable, or just as vulnerable to cyberattacks?⁴⁷

Since technological advancements evolve rapidly, the Secretary of the Navy states the Navy will "focus on the truly transformational technology that we need, not just two years, five years down the road, but 10, 15 years down the road."⁴⁸ However, the Navy cannot do it alone and must rely on other services to help generate solutions faster. The requirement to accelerate innovation has kicked off what the world calls an "A.I. arms race" that will match the intellect of human beings through Artificial General Intelligence (AGI).⁴⁹ Limited manpower can be supplemented with A.I. and automation, thus, creating a force multiplier. The technology associated with A.I. will continue to improve and, at some point, could be used to learn how to defeat adversaries in combat based on limited assets and minimal human interaction. When

considering space, force, and time, working smarter, not harder, will become pivotal to defeating strategic competitors. According to an American educator using technological advancements, "What used to take me an hour now takes me five minutes."⁵⁰ Such drastic time reduction in the military environment could mean the difference between winning and losing a fight with an adversary. Coupling modern technology with drones and unmanned systems creates unlimited possibilities in war.

Admittedly, incorporating A.I. into the U.S. armed forces is still being defined. However, this gray space has not prevented the Navy from moving out with ways to implement A.I. The team at A.I. Magazine spoke with the U.S. Navy's Chief AI Officer, Brett Vaughan, to discuss the Navy's A.I. initiatives. He stated, "Currently, the U.S. Navy is designing and developing over 1,000 AI-related activities."⁵¹ The Navy will benefit most from the autonomy of unmanned systems that can help win a war if it simply acts. Waiting for the perfect design or rules of engagement takes time, but time is of the essence. The answers to most technology deficiencies already exist in current doctrine. If China learns how to capitalize on these technological advancements before the U.S., this can be detrimental to U.S. sovereignty and place critical assets at risk of PRC attack.

Secondly, China has gained a strategic advantage in the cyber domain with non-kinetic attacks. The PRC uses the cyber domain to disrupt port operations, shipping businesses, and MTS resources that harm the global economy.⁵² Since they are trailblazing with cyberwarfare tactics and hacking methods, countering PRC non-kinetic aggression is more challenging. When looking for ways to combat China's global cyber dominance, one need not look much further than the NSS. The NSS provides guidance and direction for senior leader intent on innovation. "We will use these capabilities to outcompete our strategic competitors, galvanize collective

action on global challenges, and shape the road rules for technology, cybersecurity, and trade and economics."⁵³ The NDS also provides foundational guidance for the cyber domain. It is here leaders can find the direction to operate in the non-kinetic environment in an agile manner. "We will modernize the systems that design and build the Joint Force, focusing on innovation and rapid adjustment to new strategic demands."⁵⁴ The need to make suitable technological investments is also highlighted in the NDS and guides the steps the JFMCC should take to counter the non-kinetic PRC attacks. The JFMCC should create an environment that promotes free thinking and innovation within the maritime component to help the U.S. remain a formidable cyber competitor.

Lastly, the JFMCC must further capitalize on efforts to defend the information space to counter the PRC's disinformation efforts. China is at full sprint and has already improved its cyber posture in the information environment, while the U.S. has fallen behind. According to General Glen VanHerck, U.S. NORTHCOM commander, "In the Caribbean, China is very aggressive in the Bahamas where they have built the largest embassy in the world complete with an ambassador who 'uses the information space to undermine us every day.'"⁵⁵ Since the U.S. has become more dependent on technological advances, corresponding vulnerabilities have accompanied the advancements. "Many of these technologies have shortchanged their cybersecurity expenditures, creating ever-increasing liabilities for everyone."⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the PRC has mastered controlling information, spreading propaganda, and propagating disinformation.⁵⁷ In future conflicts, there will unlikely be boots on the ground. The concept of war has changed, and ships on the seas will only be one consideration, impacting how the JFMCC will fight China in the future. Non-kinetic attacks will prove critical to deterring the PRC's global dominance.

Instruments of DIE > M

Some may argue that, due to China's increased use of diplomacy, information, and economic instruments of power, the military instrument of power will be less helpful in deterring China's global influence. Therefore, neither sea, air, land, nor cyber domains will be pivotal in contesting strategic competitors. General Richardson highlighted that economic coercion and investment enable the PRC "To eschew international norms, advance its brand of authoritarianism, and amass power and influence at the expense of these democracies."⁵⁸ She asserts that economically inferior countries believe China is the only option since U.S. economic support is subpar or poorly publicized. Today's unconventional warfare requires financial and information supremacy and less military dominance. For instance, China has no significant air threat since its air refueling fleet is still too small to support sustained, large-scale, long-distance air combat. The PLAAF will need to upgrade its infrastructure and modernize the rest of its aircraft to pose a formidable threat to the U.S.⁵⁹ Therefore, the air domain is not as much of a concern.

Even with a concerted effort in multi-domains, China will continually utilize economic and informational coercion to create the falsehood of global investment to create debt traps that will enable closer proximity to U.S. territory. The reality is China does not truly invest in other vulnerable countries; they bring their Chinese laborers.⁶⁰ So, any military movement and maneuver are used as a feint to discretely spread their economic and informational global influence. The U.S. needs to place more of a focus on diplomatic and economic instruments of power to quell the spread of China's influence. This sentiment is especially true since the U.S. will be no match for China's sizeable naval fleet. The U.S. Joint Force Component cannot manage the responsibility of contesting strategic competitors and will not be sufficient to deter China's global influence.

However, suppressing China's red line does require a multi-domain military approach. Due to China's increased sea presence in places like the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and Solomon Islands, the JFMCC will remain a pivotal solution to combat PRC aggression and global influence. "The behavior of China, which is increasing its military presence, is exacerbating the dispute in the region with its overt expansionism and has become an object of great concern to the countries surrounding the South China Sea."⁶¹ In addition to sea control and sea denial, the military must prevent China from exploiting the air, land, and cyber domains. The U.S. cannot complete this venture with diplomacy since diplomacy attempts have proven unsuccessful. For example, when the U.S. initiated diplomatic steps to negotiate by sending Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, the trip was circumvented by China's balloon spying tactics.⁶² Further, the U.S. cannot stay abreast of China's ever-expansive economic investments in other countries. The military instrument of power will be the U.S.'s best option to deter China's global influence.

Recommendations/Conclusion

The JFMCC is vital in countering China's rising global influence but cannot do it without the ability to harness the synergistic effects of the JFACC, JFLCC, and cyber. To effectively deter the PRC's global influence, the JFMCC must incorporate joint operations across multiple domains. Doing so will create a multi-domain approach to establish dominance in the air, on land, at sea, and cyber environment. "Decades of decline, neglect, and mismanagement have led to an atrophied defense-industrial base and an undersized, aging fleet," and China will exploit this military gap.⁶³ The U.S. must not be deterred by focusing on diplomacy, information, or economics. Military superiority will drive the other three instruments of power. There must be an aggressive stance, and passivity will lead to the U.S. being vulnerable to its top adversary

through China's infiltration in Africa and South America. The U.S. military should increase its integrated training and planning efforts to combat China through a joint military approach. More joint training exercises focusing on a multi-approach to gain dominance across all domains are ideal. Practical actions should be spearheaded by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and adopted by each of the service chiefs. Once the strategic levels of leadership develop the way ahead, this process will create a much-needed culture change at the operational and tactical levels. These efforts will sustain the U.S.'s global dominance and position her to win the battle with its strategic competitors by remaining the most influential global power.

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