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14. ABSTRACT This article argues that the US joint force would be badly disadvantaged across the classical operational factors of time, space, and force in a major conflict in East Asia with China's military. It further argues that, despite some encouraging developments both at home and abroad in terms of redressing US military shortfalls and growing allied capacity, this imbalance in a regional war is likely to endure for the rest of the decade and potentially beyond.									
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Avoiding Disaster in the Pacific

Taking a Clear-Eyed View of US Challenges in a Major War with China

It has become popular to say that the prospect of war with China is on the rise. It may be true—as some argue—that Beijing’s emerging economic and international challenges will make China’s Communist Party more dangerous, or that President Xi Jinping sees himself as the “great man in history,” destined to seize Taiwan in his lifetime.¹²³⁴ Alternatively, Beijing may avoid military aggression, relying on an undisturbed global economy to advance China’s “national rejuvenation” and address the country’s daunting domestic troubles.⁵⁶ For the US military, which could be called upon to fight in a major conflict with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at any time, this debate is academic.⁷⁸ If Beijing eschews naked force, Washington could face a more sustainable military competition with China, rather than a costly war. It is also possible—even probable—that if a military clash with China does occur, cooler heads would prevail and a broader war would be averted. Unfortunately, US civilian and military leaders cannot count on these outcomes. Because an unwanted conflict may come, an accurate appreciation of the challenges the US would face in a new Pacific war is critical. Today, the US military is not ready for a major war with China—over Taiwan or any other regional issue. If a major conflict breaks out during this decade, the PLA will move first and arrive at the objective first with the great preponderance of force, while US forces would struggle to reach the battlespace and counter Beijing’s operations. This is the logical result of China’s quarter-century preparing for this very war while the United States was focused elsewhere. Further, it is likely that the US military will remain disadvantaged for years to come, because improved US capabilities and new operational concepts for an intense, multi-domain conflict with China are not yet mature or available at scale, while Beijing continues to increase its quantitative and qualitative advantages. This conclusion does not mean that the US should stop using military power to shape China’s behavior, constrain its strategic choices, and bolster our allies and partners in the region, but it does mean that if the worst happens—peace fails and a major war breaks out—US leaders should look with a clear eye on the grim prospects of US military success. The US could lose such a war, or win a victory so costly it would gut the joint force and undermine global stability, with unforeseeable consequences. Until and if the US military is better prepared for a major war with China, US leaders should bear these sobering realities in mind when considering military courses of action.

In a major fight during this decade over Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, or issues in the East or South China Seas—the most plausible scenarios for war—the PLA would make significant progress towards its objectives before the US could effectively intervene. While Washington’s aim would be to maintain or restore the pre-conflict status quo, China would have both the operational initiative and proximity to the battlespace as a revisionist power executing an offensive campaign in its home region. The factor of time would be unforgiving for American decisionmakers from the start, forcing the US into a reactive position, while China’s leaders would have a tighter “decision-execution” cycle throughout.

A review of the crisis decision-making literature suggests it will be difficult for US leaders to quickly decide to redeploy forces from other regions to strengthen US military units near China, because indicators of Beijing’s true intentions during an escalating crisis or following a unilateral decision by China’s leaders to attack will likely be fragmentary or undiagnostic.⁹¹⁰ US military and civilian officials across the interagency will be operating with different levels of access to relevant information, and during the initial stages US leaders will probably be primarily focused on preventing a crisis from escalating into a shooting war. A review of US actions in past crises with China suggests that Washington will use military forces

stationed in East Asia in the early stages of a dispute to signal resolve, reassure allies, and telegraph military capability.¹¹¹² US decisionmakers may be reluctant to send major reinforcements because doing so could be seen as escalatory by Beijing—potentially precipitating the very conflict Washington is trying to avoid—and they will be loath to compromise US security commitments in other parts of the world.

Debate over these issues will cost the US military time that the joint force does not have if China decides to attack. US forces permanently based in the theater—what the 2018 National Defense Strategy appropriately labeled the “blunt layer”—are particularly vulnerable.¹³ In military terms, early US decisions to use forward-deployed forces to signal China, both to deter aggression and to buy time for reinforcements, will likely result in these forces being highly visible while operating near the area of crisis; this is the opposite of preserving these forces and preparing them to have meaningful combat effects against a peer adversary. Further, US decisions to delay a major reinforcement—or decisions to send reinforcements in a piecemeal fashion—effectively leave forward-deployed US forces in an operationally untenable position if a crisis evolves into open conflict.

In many discussions exploring a US-China war, this issue—the critical role of early decisions by US leaders—is not adequately considered. In emulations and debates this is often done because the focus is on military issues at the operational or even tactical levels, rather than national-level policy. An early US decision to flow forces to the region and early US political commitment to fight are often assumed, because if that assumption is not made US forces are so badly overmatched that there is not much to discuss.¹⁴¹⁵ In the real world, this assumption could easily prove to be faulty, in which case the actual choice Washington would face would be between accepting a military *fait accompli* by Beijing or throwing ill-prepared forces against an adversary that is well on its way to securing its objectives.

Some analysts have pointed to the potential to protract a conflict with the PLA, bogging down China’s forces until the US can bring further capabilities to bear—a particularly appealing possibility in a Taiwan invasion scenario. The potential advantages for US intervention if Taiwan’s defenders can stand long enough for the US to overcome the tyranny of distance and negate China’s first-mover advantage have gained further attention in light of Russia’s struggles to achieve quick victory in Ukraine.¹⁶ Unfortunately, this approach will only succeed if Taiwan can and does fight effectively. In a recent report detailing their use of a Taiwan-scenario wargame model, analysts Mark Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham from the Center for Strategic and International Studies report that over 24 iterations of their emulation, US forces were most often able to stall a PLA invasion of Taiwan.¹⁷ But these stalemates came at a terrible cost to the US joint force, and even these results are predicated on an effective and enduring Taiwan defense— an assumption that is far from justified in assessing Taiwan’s defense progress today.¹⁸¹⁹ Even if Taiwan’s forces hold against initial PLA assaults, as the wargame’s authors note, there is no “Ukraine model” for Taiwan; it is an island. The US would have to sustain Taiwan’s defense by sea or from the air, running military and civil supplies through the teeth of the PLA’s defense while also waging a major war.

Looking back at history, the United States has faced similar time-distance military dilemmas before. Current US discussions about how to prosecute a conflict with China resemble the confused situation of the 1920’s through the 1930’s, when US Pacific planning was mired in debates about how to prepare for a future conflict with Japan. As Edward Miller has shown in his history of interwar Pacific planning, during this period poor assumptions and under-explored concepts dominated US operational discussions, and ill-conceived objectives persisted long after

they had been rendered unachievable by Japan's increasing military capability or emergent shortfalls in the US' own capabilities. Different camps persisted in advocating for the US to rapidly project and sustain forces forward in the face of Japanese assault across the theater, even though these approaches were not logistically feasible or operationally sound.²⁰ These plans fundamentally did not respond to the time advantage Japan inherently held as the aggressor acting in its own region, and were born more from a reluctance to acknowledge the implications of the shift in the military balance against the US than from sober analysis. In the event, these approaches were recognized as flawed and discarded before the war came. When it did come, Japan swept US and allied forces from the theater and it took more than three years for US forces to fight back to their initial positions.²¹

US forces would also face difficulties operating across the vast maritime space of the Pacific theater in a war with China because Beijing has successfully leveraged its growing power to "set the theater." Many countries in the Western Pacific, already leery of being forced to choose between Washington and Beijing in the two powers' emerging strategic competition, would probably not agree to host US combat forces during a war. This will deny US forces needed flexibility and sustainment to prosecute a conflict. While China's military will be fighting a "home game" on interior lines near its mainland, the US joint force would struggle to synchronize its operations from few and far-flung bases and mass forces to achieve local superiority, while relying on extended and vulnerable lines of communication.

In the Pacific during World War Two, nearly every island or landmass on which the US conducted military operations—and on which it constructed its numerous bases—was a colonial territory of some kind. In many cases the colonial power that exercised nominal political control over the land US forces used for power projection and sustainment was itself occupied by German forces in faraway Europe. US civilian and military leaders were thus largely free to "use" the map of East Asia to attack Japanese forces and advance toward the home islands in the optimal manner allowed by the geography of the theater. Today, the US would have to convince sovereign nations that it is in their interests to back Washington in a war against China—a tall order. Over the past decade Beijing has entrenched economic ties with many states across the region, including US allies such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. Beijing has shown itself willing and able to "weaponize" these countries' economic dependence on China when they have acted against China's interests²²—on issues much less serious to Beijing than a war with the US. In fact, if regional countries' behavior during the 2022 dispute over US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is an indicator of how they would act in a shooting conflict, US basing options for combat forces could be quite limited.²³

In World War Two, the US declared that its aim was the unconditional surrender of Imperial Japan, but in a Pacific war against China today the US would have much more limited aims. Washington would not seek regime change in a major nuclear power. For countries in the region—even US allies—it will be hard to back a US war if the outcome, at best, would leave a vengeful Chinese Communist Party in place governing China as the regional hegemon, certain to punish them for supporting an American war. This suggests that while the Philippines' recent agreement to re-open a number of bases to US forces is a welcome sign that could lead to further opportunities for US forces to exploit the geography of the theater,²⁴ Washington could find itself again denied use of critical bases in the Philippines or elsewhere if a real war were to come.

Since it is likely the US would have relatively few bases from which to operate, the challenge for the PLA to counter US power projection will be correspondingly easier. The PLA

will be able to concentrate its formidable intelligence capabilities to find, fix, and track US forces moving to attack Chinese targets because US forces will be effectively canalized into a limited number of predictable vectors to approach the battlespace.²⁵ It is the PLA which will be best postured to use the theater's geography, bringing US forces under long-range fires that can threaten the entire region, while US units will be largely defensive, unable to strike back at the PLA's long-range shooters, either because US forces lack sufficient massed capability, or because US leaders forbid attacks on China's mainland to limit escalation. While US naval forces will be less constrained by geography, and will be able to challenge the PLA by attacking from the flexible medium of the sea, the Navy will struggle to generate sufficient mass on its own to be decisive, and in the end is also reliant on land-based facilities.

To these difficulties will be added the myriad challenges the US would face establishing, maintaining, and defending long logistical support lines running back to the continental United States and beyond. To use just one example, publicly-available studies suggest that US forces will rapidly expend weapons—especially advanced munitions—during a conflict with a capable adversary such as the PLA, creating a high demand for reloads.²⁶ The US would struggle to maintain throughput of critical munitions to sustain high-tempo operations given the distances involved and the challenges of safely delivering weapons to US forces at a few theater bases that the PLA can observe and strike. Failure to deliver munitions—or fuel, repair and maintenance, food, or water—to US units could force an operational pause even if US combat losses do not, gifting the PLA with time and space to advance its own operations.

The sheer mass of China's forces will present a severe challenge to the US in a major war, even if the US enjoys enough time in a brewing crisis to increase its forces in the region and Washington secures more bases in more countries than currently seems likely. During the last serious Taiwan strait crisis in 1996—only five years after the US led a coalition of thirty-five nations in a military tour-de-force in the First Gulf War—Beijing was forced to back down in the face of US military capability it could not hope to challenge.²⁷ Today, China could rapidly bring more forces to bear than the United States could—a reversal of the balance of effective forces each side could command in the 1996 crisis. In the quarter-century since that standoff, Beijing has conducted an unprecedented military buildup and modernization program engineered specifically to counter the power projection capabilities and platforms that still comprise the backbone of the US joint force. In that same timeframe, the US military has sharply contracted—in terms of ships, aircraft, and front-line personnel—while remaining largely static in the operational approaches it would employ in a great power war.²⁸ If the US is drawn into a major conflict with China in East Asia during this decade, China's sustained investment in modernized forces and improved capabilities could prove decisive.

Recent analyses of the US-China military balance suggest that the PLA has achieved parity with the US in absolute capability terms in key areas²⁹—noting for example that by 2019 the PLA Navy had passed the US to have the most warships in its fleet.³⁰ Other analysts project that comparative naval strength could worsen for the US in the future,³¹ and Sam Tangredi of the US Naval War College has recently noted that, historically, the country with the larger fleet has almost invariably won the important naval engagements.³² While this is concerning, it also misses the point. There is no reasonable prospect that the PLA will face the whole US Navy or the entire joint force in a fast-evolving war in the second island chain. Rather, China's military will contend only with the fraction of the joint force that is in the region at the onset of major hostilities. US forces will not have the chance to meet the PLA Navy in the open sea for a

decisive battle. Rather, US forces will fight the whole PLA, which continues to operate—despite concerns about its potential global ambitions—almost exclusively in China’s mainland or immediate waters. In a scenario where US forces are arriving in the theater, racing to deny China a rapid victory in a regional contest, the PLA will be able to engage US forces piecemeal, bringing to bear the capabilities of all of its military services and retaining local superiority in nearly every engagement.

Two recent developments with US allies have led some to hope that a reversal of the military balance may be in the offing. These are the announcement by Japan that Tokyo will significantly increase its defense budget and improve its capabilities over the next decade,³³ and the announcement of AUKUS, a new US security partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom, including a program to produce nuclear attack submarines for the Australian navy.³⁴ While these are advantageous developments with strong allies, the primary value of these efforts today is signaling to China that US allies, in the region and abroad, are increasingly committed to countering Beijing’s aggressive actions. Unfortunately, it will be years yet before either agreement expands allied contributions to the fielded forces actually available to fight the PLA. While the US looks to our allies to share the defense burden of the future, Beijing’s “friend without limits”—Vladimir Putin’s Russia—could further reduce Washington’s ability to surge forces to East Asia during a war. Moscow could use its naval or nuclear forces during an East Asia crisis to assume a threatening posture, necessitating a US response that would tie down significant US capabilities—especially US naval forces—to aid Beijing, without firing a shot.³⁵³⁶

In addition to its advantages in the quantity of available sea, air, and ground forces, Beijing has designed the PLA specifically to exploit its home region advantage and to counter US forces that must come into China’s near periphery in a regional conflict. This includes the creation of the world’s largest mobile ground-based conventional missile force,³⁷ with growing inventories of long-range weapons designed to strike surface ships and distant US airfields.³⁸³⁹ It also includes the creation of the PLA’s Strategic Support Force, a military service optimized for dominance in the space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic domains—designed and tooled specifically to undercut the C4ISR architecture on which the US relies to operate its forces abroad.⁴⁰ The US does not have mature corollaries to these purpose-built organizations.

US observers, faced with the daunting reality of Beijing’s military build-up, often assert that the proficiency of US personnel and the quality of US weapons systems will advantage US forces over their PLA counterparts in a conflict. Unfortunately, this argument has become less valid over time as the PLA has improved qualitatively as well as quantitatively. China’s leaders appear to agree that PLA officers are not the equal of their American counterparts, and have taken steps to recruit, train, and retain more talented personnel.⁴¹⁴² The PLA is also leaning heavily into command automation and future applications of artificial intelligence to enhance the speed with which its officers can direct operations.⁴³ Whether these measures will make PLA officers the equal of US leaders remains to be seen, but it is not clear how the US could leverage its more capable operational commanders to overcome all the other advantages the PLA has established.

On the weapons side of the qualitative debate, US observers should not be sanguine, either. By 2020, China’s military had become the first to field hypersonic weapons in its deployed forces,⁴⁴ and in 2021 Beijing launched a world-circling hypersonic weapon that caught the US by surprise.⁴⁵ The PLA today fields stealth fighters, numerous diesel and nuclear attack submarines and advanced surface combatants. China’s Eastern seaboard is shielded by one of the densest advanced air defense systems in the world, and Beijing’s nuclear forces are on track to

close the gap with the Washington and Moscow in terms of the size and quality of its strategic forces in the coming decades.⁴⁶ All of this suggests that the lingering perception that the PLA is merely an army of conscripts using knock-off weapons is wrong.

Finally, in a large-scale fight with China, the US will lose forces, including front-line platforms and units, and rapidly expend advanced munitions. For the modern joint force, these losses are not replaceable within the arc of a fast-developing conflict. By one estimate, it would take the Air Force and the Navy approximately a decade to replace its 2020 inventory of ships, aircraft, and munitions—even if the US military-industrial base surged to its maximum production capacity.⁴⁷ The US today does not have nearly enough advanced weapons, and is not advancing its capacity to increase its supply at a level equal to the current challenge; one recent analysis indicates that the US will exhaust available high-end munitions in a regional war with China in a single week.⁴⁸

Fundamentally, the United States has not fashioned a military tool equal to the challenge of a major war with the PLA in China's periphery. Today, the joint force faces major disadvantages across the operational factors of time, space, and force in such a conflict. Although recent developments in the Department of Defense, the services, and on the Hill—and with our allies and partners—are encouraging, we are not now on track to address this military imbalance before the end of the decade, if then. Despite this shortfall, Washington continues to maintain a range of security commitments inside the second island chain, in China's back yard. This represents an enduring divorce between US ends and means. This is not necessarily an insurmountable problem for the United States as it pursues strategic competition with Beijing during peacetime, where US and international capacities in diplomacy, trade and information competition can lead the approach to China, bolstered by US military efforts. However, if the competition tilts into war—leaving the balance to stand primarily on the basis of the two powers' military strength—US leaders should recognize the limits of what the joint force may be able to achieve, and the probable costs of such a war.

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