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Through the Lens of Distance: Understanding and Responding to China's "Ripples of Capability"

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SUMMARY

Several pronounced trends are emerging as the United States moves beyond its “unipolar moment,” the foremost among them being the rise of developing powers and the proliferation of asymmetric technologies. The Asia-Pacific, with a rising China at its center, is the critical arena in which Washington must respond to these challenges. China’s unyielding stance on its present territorial and maritime claims and continued development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities are particularly worrisome. While it is premature to project a global power transition in which China eclipses U.S. power and influence, the United States needs to remain closely aware of and engaged in regional affairs to retain an influential role and remain a reliable security partner throughout the Asia-Pacific. This brief offers a set of force structure priorities for the United States as it grapples with China’s increasingly sophisticated capabilities.

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BACKGROUND

While the growth of China's comprehensive national power may continue to proceed rapidly, it may, alternatively, slow or even falter. There is a strong possibility that China is already facing increasing "headwinds" in its growth. These negative factors could manifest themselves even as China challenges U.S. forces increasingly via asymmetric means, with particular focus on the three "Near Seas" (the Yellow, East China, and South China Seas). In fact, economic problems and even resulting political instability could combine with rising nationalism to motivate Chinese leaders to adopt more confrontational military approaches, particularly regarding unresolved territorial and maritime claims in the Near Seas. If this is the case, the era in which China poses the greatest potential to challenge U.S. strategic interests and the efficacy of the global system—and is doing so in practice—may have already begun. Assuming that high intensity kinetic conflict can be avoided—fortunately, a highly likely prospect, particularly given Washington and Beijing's substantial shared interests—China's greatest challenge to U.S. interests and the global system might thus be the already-unfolding strategic competition, friction, pressuring, and occasional crises in the Near Seas.

Beijing's "blue water" naval expansion beyond the second island chain, which is not proceeding at the highest level, does not pose a serious problem for Washington. Indeed, as a growing great power, it is only natural for China to develop an increasing presence in this realm, and in many respects it should be welcomed. The U.S. has and will continue to have many viable options to address any problems that might emerge in this area, at least with respect to a high intensity kinetic conflict. For instance, Chinese forces themselves are highly vulnerable to precisely the same types of "asymmetric" approaches (e.g., missile attacks) that they can employ to great effect closer to China's shores. In fact, there is substantial room for cooperation beyond the Near Seas. This potential may even be said to be growing, as China's overseas interests and capabilities increase, thereby allowing it to contribute in unprecedented ways. In this area, which covers the vast majority of the globe, China appears to be cautiously open to U.S. ideas about "defense of the global system"—which offer excellent opportunities for "free riding" off U.S.-led public goods provision.

The problem is that in the Near Seas themselves, and possibly beyond them over time, China is working to carve out a sphere of strategic influence within which freedom of navigation and other important international system-sustaining norms do not apply.

Thus, aside from the more inherently malign proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), other pernicious activities of rogue states like Iran and North Korea, terrorism and ideological extremism, disruptive technologies, and climate change, what is arguably the greatest potential challenge to U.S. and systemic interests is China's already-present ability to engage in A2/AD operations within the Near Seas/first island chain and their immediate approaches, assisted in part by the land-based Second Artillery Force; as well as longer-range precision strikes and global cyber activities. This A2/AD challenge threatens U.S. naval platforms, but is far more than just a Chinese navy-based threat. It could already be difficult to handle kinetically with current U.S. approaches, and the situation appears to be worsening rapidly. The U.S. may not have years to develop new countermeasures and prepare to address the most difficult aspects of the problem; in a sense, "the future is now."

KEY TRENDS

Several pronounced trends seem to be emerging as the United States moves beyond its "unipolar moment" yet appears poised to remain the world's sole superpower for years to come.

Rise of Developing Powers. First, the world is witnessing the rapid ascension of several developing regional powers—namely China, India, and Brazil. This is part of an unprecedented transfer of wealth and influence from West to East, and from the developed world to the developing world.

Proliferation of Asymmetric Technologies. Second, diffusion of knowledge and the education of talented individuals are dispersing technological development around an increasingly "flat" (interconnected) world. Outside of the industrialized world, the most high-level, comprehensive development is occurring in rising powers that have sufficient government organization to fund and shape key programs while exploiting foreign direct investment, competitive wages, and expatriates returning from studying and working abroad. Given the unraveling of Cold War policy consensus, the United States and its existing allies and friends are increasingly less able to control the development and proliferation of key technologies.

ASIA-PACIFIC APPLICATIONS

As the world's most economically vibrant area, its greatest source of climate-changing pollution, and its most militarily dynamic region—at risk for high-level

el kinetic conflict as well as non-traditional security threats—the Asia-Pacific is the most critical area for Washington to understand the aforementioned trends and act accordingly. China in particular enjoys remarkable growth that is funding robust civil and military development and greatly increasing its strategic, diplomatic, and environmental influence.

The rise of China, as well as the ongoing division of both sides of the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, poses the risk of dangerous disruptions to the established international order, including nuclear instability and proliferation in the case of North Korea. Great power balancing and contention, perceived to have largely ended in Western Europe, appears alive and well in Asia. A fundamental question, then, is how China envisions the future role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific. The previous coincidence of America's rise on the world stage with China's more than a century of withdrawal from it means that China and the United States have never been powerful simultaneously. While it has been noticeably flexible and positive in other areas, Beijing is unyielding with respect to its present territorial and maritime claims—and it has numerous options to support its position.

China's S-curved Trajectory. China is at the center of a rising Asia. In 2008, the U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) projected that:

China is poised to have more impact on the world over the next 20 years than any other country. If current trends persist, by 2025 China will have the world's second largest economy and will be a leading military power. It also could be the largest importer of natural resources and the biggest polluter.¹

With fourteen years left before 2025, the NIC's predictions have already materialized. China has risen at a rate beyond even its leaders' expectations over the past three decades, and a power shift is afoot in the international system. The fully unipolar system that persisted from 1991 to roughly 2008 is no more. And China could very well continue to expand its economy (and by extension its national power) at a rate that the United States, Japan, and many European countries would envy.

For all its policy navigation, efforts to guide national development, and claims of exceptionalism, however, China is not immune to larger patterns of economics and history. As such, it will likely not be able to avoid the S curve-shaped growth slowdown that so many previous great powers have experienced,

and that many observers believe the United States is undergoing today.

China is likely to follow an S-curved path as key internal and external challenges—including pollution, corruption, chronic diseases, water shortages, growing domestic security spending, and an aging population—build on one another and exact mounting costs. China is encountering these headwinds at a much earlier stage in its development than did the United States and other great powers, thanks in part to its late start in modernization, dramatic internal disparities, and draconian policy choices.²

Enduring American Strengths. Meanwhile, the United States remains blessed with abundant resources, cutting-edge universities and research institutions, an innovative capitalist economy, the world's largest and most advanced military, a diverse and adaptable democratic society, a robust and reasonably efficient legal and regulatory system, attractive cultural “soft power,” the most favorable demographic profile in the OECD, and a network of resilient allies, friends, and partners with which to cooperate. It is thus positioned to remain the world's preeminent power and public goods provider for the foreseeable future. Increased U.S. willingness to work cooperatively with partners around the world to provide collective security solutions is likely to underwrite enduring influence.

Window of Vulnerability. For all these reasons, it is extremely premature to project a global power transition in which China eclipses U.S. power and influence overall. At the same time, both America's present fiscal challenges and China's rise and regional interests are undeniable realities. From the perspective of U.S. interests, stability, and access to the global commons, then, the greatest risk would appear to be an emerging “window of vulnerability” during which Washington has not yet resolved its domestic challenges and Beijing has not yet been slowed down by its own. The primary arena for this strategic competition is likely to be the Near Seas and their immediate approaches.

China's concept of Near Seas encompasses the Bohai Gulf and the Yellow, East China, and South China seas, as well as still-contested islands and maritime zones therein, of which China claims the vast majority. This is an area of substantial economic activity and resource extraction, transit, and processing for China. For these reasons, the Near Seas and their immediate approaches absorb the bulk of Chinese strategic focus and military deployment, and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Given the South China

1. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2008.

2. For detailed analysis, see Collins and Erickson 2011.

Sea's status as a resource-rich, heavily transited portion of the global maritime commons with portions abutted and claimed by many nations, it is likely to be the most strategically central and contested of the Near Seas.

A2/AD Weapons Development and Technological Revolution. Since World War II, the United States has helped to secure and maintain the global commons—key mediums used by all but owned by no one. Initially, this involved the sea and air; more recently, it has come to include the space and cyber dimensions. As Abraham Denmark points out, however, “the rise of China is a defining characteristic of every commons. A 30-year military modernization effort has made China the region’s largest potential threat to the stability of the commons while, ironically, also making it more dependent on those commons.”³ In order to further its parochial interests, Beijing wishes to impose antiquated territorial notions on the portions of these commons that adjoin its territorial waters and airspace, and to do so is developing A2/AD capabilities designed specifically to prevent U.S. and allied military intervention in any related scenarios. Like other lesser potential military competitors such as Iran, it purposely avoids matching U.S. forces directly and instead privileges operations optimized for a relatively narrow range of contingencies and missions.

CHINA’S RADIATING RANGE RINGS

The most common source of error in Chinese and U.S. analyses of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) development is the conflation of two factors: scope and intensity. A stone dropped into the water forms waves that radiate outward, gradually dissipating in the process. Close to home, China’s military capabilities are rapidly reaching a very high level. However, they are making much slower progress, from a much lower baseline, further away.⁴ The major exceptions to this pattern occur in cyberspace, in which physical distances are largely meaningless, and space, in which China’s capabilities are more evenly distributed and hence more global in nature.

To call this a “tale of two militaries” oversimplifies, since some platforms and weapon systems can contribute in both areas, but it captures the basic dynamic. Many vehicles and armaments are primarily relevant in one area or the other. Cherry-picking the characteristics of either of these “layers” or “levels” to

3. Denmark 2010, 202.

4. For a detailed explanation, see Erickson 2011.

characterize overall Chinese military/maritime power risks fundamentally misrepresenting its critical dynamics.

On one hand, it is a mistake to exaggerate the scope of intense buildup: China is simply not moving to develop a “blue water” power-projection navy at the same rate that it is deploying shorter-range platforms and weapon systems such as missiles—many on land, but also on air-, sea-, and undersea-based platforms. On the other hand, it is equally misguided to suggest that restraint and limitations in the “Far Seas” indicates restraint and limitations in the Near Seas.

“Counting all the beans” by treating side-by-side comparison of all Chinese and U.S. forces as the key metric, as sometimes done by those who would minimize the PLA’s significance, is only relevant if one assumes that the pertinent scenario is a Cold War–style Sino-American global conflict—a virtual impossibility, fortunately. Rather, China is seeking to further its core interests by pursuing an asymmetric approach. In the words of Thomas Christensen, this involves “posing problems without catching up.”⁵ Indeed, the problems may be worse now than Christensen described a decade ago, since in certain areas China is catching up, and in others—such as anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs)—it is perhaps already well ahead.

RECLAIMING THE “RIGHT END OF PHYSICS”

Each Chinese “capability ripple” does not require a unique U.S. military approach, but there should be a corresponding continuum of responses. This suggests a clear set of force structure priorities—or “hard choices,” given Washington’s current budgetary difficulties.

As a rising great power, it is natural that China has increasing influence and responsibility in the international system. In what might colloquially be termed the “Spiderman Doctrine,” the guiding principle here should be that “With great power comes great responsibility.” To the extent that China is able and willing to provide public goods to the international system, its great power leadership and status should be recognized in return. The United States must thus be judicious in disagreeing with China, but act firmly and credibly when it does. The most dangerous scenario is one in which Washington claims to maintain capabilities that Beijing believes it no longer has, thereby emboldening Beijing to challenge the status quo by force.

To avoid this destabilizing outcome, the United States must back its rhetoric with enduring power. Nowhere is this more important than on, above, and under

5. Christensen 2001.

the Near Seas, where China is rapidly improving A2/AD capabilities by systematically targeting physics-based limitations in U.S., allied, and friendly military platforms.

To shape a force structure that is less vulnerable to asymmetric Chinese challenges, and thereby “reclaim the right end of physics,” Pentagon planners must follow these principles:

1. Shift to less-manned and unmanned systems, which—while they face limitations given current technologies—can already be smaller, cheaper, and more disposable, enabling better persistence, maneuverability, and tolerance of losses.
2. Limit reliance on manpower wherever feasible, since personnel costs absorb an ever-greater proportion of the U.S. military budget.
3. For a limited number of relevant applications, consider shifting at least some operations from large, tightly-grouped targets—for example, a carrier strike group (CSG)—to smaller, dispersed, networked elements.
4. Move from the sea surface to the harder-to-access undersea—and in some cases air—realms. Space, by contrast, is expensive to enter, hard to sustain assets in, contains no defensive ground, and—barring energy-intensive maneuvering—forces assets into predictable orbits. Moreover, some of the most debilitating asymmetric tactics could be employed against space and cyberspace targets. Space-based platforms are not a panacea and should not constitute a disproportionate share of newly-developed assets. For the foreseeable future, however, space will remain indispensable for multiple reasons. There are many military functions that are best performed from space, particularly to support command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) and long-distance power projection.
5. Substitute passive defenses, such as dispersion of assets or reinforced concrete, for active defenses, such as ballistic missile defense (BMD), in contexts in which this is cheaper and/or more effective.

U.S. CSGs and other platforms are increasingly threatened by A2/AD weapons like ASBMs and streaming cruise missiles. Regardless of how much the United States spends on BMD and other countermeasures (and limits are already emerging), its CSGs may still face restrictions in future high-intensity combat operations. Beijing knows this and already appears to

be seeking deterrent effects with its small, but likely growing, number of deployed ASBMs, whatever their precise level of capability at present.⁶

Despite its dramatic progress in A2/AD, however, China has minimal BMD, anti-submarine warfare, and mine countermeasures capabilities. U.S. investment in missiles, submarines, and sea mines, therefore, can reverse the military equation in its favor. The goal is not to attack or threaten China, but rather to deter it from using force or displays of military might to change the regional status quo unilaterally.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

Technology matters, but so does geography. In fact, as exemplified by China’s approach of “using the land to control the sea” (以陆制海; exerting power and influence over the Near Seas largely via land-based missiles, aircraft, and other assets), the two are often intimately interlinked.

The rise of major regional powers, China foremost among them, is ending the era in which the U.S. military could assume unobstructed access to the entire global commons, and deemphasize region-specific concepts in favor of global approaches in force structure, strategy, and strategic communications. A strategic approach centered on defending the global system remains vital, but maintaining the capability to do so in practice requires regional focus and prioritization to address key dynamics in the most important yet challenging regions for furthering U.S. interests. Progress in this area is indicated by the Obama Administration’s emerging focus on the Asia Pacific region foremost,⁷ with the Middle East/Indian Ocean as the second-most important region.

U.S. ability to address the long-term challenges and opportunities that China offers is limited by the fact that it does not have today, and indeed has never

6. 國防部「國防報告書」編纂委員會 [Ministry of Defense, “National Defense Report” Editorial Board], 中華民國壹百年國防報告書 [Republic of China Centennial 2011 National Defense Report] (Taipei: 國防部 [Ministry of Defense], 2011); “China’s Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) Reaches Equivalent of ‘Initial Operational Capability’ (IOC)—Where It’s Going and What it Means,” China Analysis from Original Sources, available at <<http://www.andrewerickson.com/2011/07/china%e2%80%99s-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-asbm-reaches-equivalent-of-%e2%80%9cinitial-operational-capability%e2%80%9d-ioc%e2%80%94where-it%e2%80%99s-going-and-what-it-means/>>.

7. Clinton 2011.

had, an Asia-Pacific strategy. U.S. combatant commands themselves do not even issue documents to that effect. The closest exception to this overall neglect came in the mid-to-late 1990s, when the Department of Defense Office of International Security Affairs issued a series of unclassified regional policy documents.⁸ It is time to go beyond this brief, fleeting effort.

Subordination of vital regional realities to global strategy may have been appropriate during the Cold War, when the United States confronted a global adversary, and in the subsequent “unipolar moment” from 1991–2008, when U.S. hegemony was undisputed and substantial regional challengers and a proliferation of post-al Qaeda terrorist threats had yet to manifest themselves, but it is appropriate no longer. The current challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan provide a sobering reminder that the U.S. government focuses on absolute theoretical concepts and rigid, one-size-fits-all strategies at its peril in this ever more interconnected yet increasingly regionalized and unstable world. U.S. planners must increase their regional knowledge, enhance coordination, and, for the first time, consider the Asia-Pacific holistically as a vital strategic space with the South China Sea at its center. The South China Sea commands this critical position because it is the interface between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and as such is the conduit for a tremendous portion of global commerce and energy. It is thus a vital strategic fulcrum and potential chokepoint. China’s pursuit of an extreme minority interpretation of international law here and elsewhere in the Near Seas to restrict freedom of navigation in the broadest sense is thus unacceptable. It additionally threatens to undermine the maritime governance of important areas of the 38 percent of the world’s oceans claimable as exclusive economic zones.⁹

Examining China’s military capabilities “through the lens of distance” offers important insights into regional security issues. Distance from China matters, so allies and friends further away are likely to feel less threatened, and there is more that the United States can do easily to support them. This makes a country like Singapore, for instance, a much more fitting long-term security partner than Vietnam. Physical medium matters, so China’s maritime neighbors are likely to feel less threatened, and be less vulnerable, than its land neighbors. In addition to its status (with Japan, South

8. See, for example, *United States Security Strategy for the Asia-Pacific Region*, 1995, 1998; *United States Security Strategy for the Middle East*, 1995; *United States Security Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa*, 1995; *United States Security Strategy for Europe and NATO*, 1995.

9. Dutton 2011.

Korea, Australia, and Thailand) as one of the United States’ five Asian treaty allies, this makes the Philippines a more appropriate security partner than Vietnam, and suggests that the U.S.–Japan alliance will be more straightforward and flexible in the future than that with South Korea. China already has the ability to hold fixed military bases at risk with missiles, and will increasingly try to undermine host nation support for them, so the United States should be cautious about investing in and relying on foreign military bases. Instead, it should concentrate investment in a carefully-dispersed and readily-deployable set of assets based in U.S. sovereign locations ranging westward to Guam, as well as in the British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia. From this stable and sustainable foundation, it can continue to partner with other nations, and seek access to facilities on their territory.

As for broader strategy, this means that the United States can at a minimum continue its regional presence as a power that combines offshore balancing with robust power projection capabilities in the Asian littoral—the ultimate acknowledgement of the “tyranny of distance” by a nation still sufficiently robust in relative power to play a global strategic role. Moving Marines from Okinawa to Guam while also deploying Marines to Australia is already a step in that direction. But fully assuming the role of an offshore balancer and withdrawing from the Asian rimland entirely would represent a significant strategic setback. If the United States follows the approaches outlined above to “reclaim the right end of physics” while remaining closely aware of, and engaged in, regional affairs, it can retain an influential role and remain a reliable ally, friend, and security partner throughout the Asia-Pacific. Over the long run, this continued engagement from a position of strength will also offer the most effective basis for pursuing competitive coexistence with China.

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