

Understanding Pathways to Conflict in the Western Pacific

David W. Kearn, Jr.

St. John's University

May 2016

Knowledge-Net for a Better World

The East Asia Institute (EAI) is a nonprofit and independent research organization in Korea, founded in May 2002. The EAI strives to transform East Asia into a society of nations based on liberal democracy, market economy, open society, and peace.

The EAI takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

 EAI is a registered trademark.

Copyright © 2016 by EAI

This electronic publication of EAI intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Copies may not be duplicated for commercial purposes. Unauthorized posting of EAI documents to a non-EAI website is prohibited. EAI documents are protected under copyright law.

“Understanding Pathways to Conflict in the Western Pacific”
ISBN 979-11-86226-89-6 95340

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, 158 Euljiro
Jung-gu, Seoul 04548
Republic of Korea
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683
Fax 82 2 2277 1684



Understanding Pathways to Conflict in the Western Pacific*

David W. Kearn, Jr.
St. John's University
May 2016

Abstract

This paper examines potential mechanisms or pathways to military conflict between the United States and People's Republic of China (PRC) based on prevailing approaches from International Relations (IR) Theory. Focusing on these theories and their primary causal factors, we can explain how these two Pacific powers could find themselves in a future crisis or military conflict. While offensive realism, focusing on power and shifts in relative power, would be expected to paint a particularly gloomy picture, the predictions of a defensive realist analysis, focusing on geography and military technology, are also troubling. The security dilemma in the Western Pacific seems to be intensifying, introducing crisis and arms race instabilities and escalation dynamics in the event of a crisis. Finally, many of the domestic political factors that predict more cooperative outcomes in interstate relations are weak or absent in the U.S.-China relationship. Therefore, there are few internal restraints on policies that could precipitate conflict. Conversely, these internal forces could make risky behavior more likely. Understanding these pathways to conflict, it is possible to develop policies to address the most dangerous aspects of the security environment in the Western Pacific while maintaining stability, reassuring U.S. allies, and improving the prospects of cooperation.

This paper examines potential pathways to military conflict between the United States and China, specifying discrete mechanisms or pathways based on major prevailing International Relations (IR) Theories.¹ It is part of a larger project on deterrence in East Asia and therefore seeks to un-

* Paper Prepared for the EAI Fellows Program on Peace, Governance, and Development in East Asia.

DRAFT PAPER – PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

¹ Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (eds.), *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*



cover political-military and diplomatic strategies to decrease the probability of conflict between these two great powers and increase the stability of the relationship and across the East and Southeast Asian regions. However, to attempt to understand how best to avoid conflict, it is useful to identify and assess the ways in which the United States and China are most likely to find themselves on the brink of utilizing military force. While there are numerous ways to approach this task, this paper will derive mechanisms from prevailing IR theories focusing on the question of conflict initiation and major power war.² These theoretical approaches have been empirically tested and provide important and useful insights that are directly relevant to the situation that confront leaders in Washington and Beijing today.³

Since 2010, China's foreign policy has seemingly taken on a much more assertive tone, particularly with regard to relations with its neighbors in the Western Pacific. Eschewing the more reassuring "soft power" strategy of the previous decade, Beijing has been much more assertive in expressing its preferences in territorial disputes.⁴ For example, Chinese activities in the East and South China Seas, including its unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over disputed territory in the East China Sea and its extensive "land reclamation" activities in the South China Sea (seemingly contradicting President Xi Jinping's pledge not to "militarize" the area) have called into question Beijing longer-term intension over the long-run.⁵ All of this takes place in the midst of a decade-long military modernization program of the Peoples Liberation Army, making remarkable strides in a range of capabilities in both quantitative and qualitative terms.⁶

While it is perhaps unsurprising that offensive versions of structural realism would paint a particularly gloomy picture of the future of U.S.-China relations, defensive realist analysis focusing more on the nature of the security dilemma and the impact of military technology and geog-

(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press 2003).

² Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote, Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, *Theories of War and Peace: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999)

³ Recent works on U.S.-China Relations, see: David Shambaugh, *The China Reader: Rising Power 6th Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016), David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), David Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2012), Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), Nina Hachigian, *Debating China: The U.S.- China Relationship in Ten Conversations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴ David W. Kearns, Jr. "A Hard Case for Soft Power: China's Rise and Security in East Asia," *Journal of Asian Politics and History* 3 (Fall 2013).

⁵ Chico Harlan, "China Creates air defense zone in East China Sea amid dispute with Japan," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2013, Derek Watkins, "What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea," October 27, 2015, Jeremy Page, Carol E. Lee and Gordon Lubold, "China's President Pledges No Militarization in Disputed Islands," *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2015.

⁶ Eric Heginbotham, et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography and the Evolving Balance of Power* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015).



raphy in the region are not markedly more optimistic for peace.⁷ The presence of a rising power expanding its interests in the region and demanding greater influence commensurate with its new status facing off against a status quo power and its allies has often been viewed as a driver of major power war.⁸ However, while geographic distance and maritime boundaries may create the perception of a relatively mild security dilemma, the growing probability of small-scale clashes in an environment where both states may have first-strike incentives, the reality is much more dangerous.⁹ Taking into account the interests of long-standing U.S. allies in the region only magnifies this problem.

Moreover, many of the domestic or unit-level forces that mitigate against international rivalry and restrain states from contemplating the use of military force are simply too weak or absent in the U.S.-China relationship.¹⁰ The two leading economic powers in the world are clearly highly interdependent, and one cannot deny that both countries have become much “closer” over the past decade in cosmopolitan terms. Unfortunately, this expansion is starting from a very low level and its impact is exceedingly difficult to consider against clear U.S. diplomatic priorities, like its alliances with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. More importantly, the nature of China’s regime remains a clear and unambiguous reminder of its revolutionary and authoritarian past, and the inherent uncertainty and lack of institutional constraints on executive power. Quite obviously, the mechanisms that constitute the liberal or democratic peace are absent.¹¹ If anything, perceptions of Chinese aggression against smaller democratic neighbors or human rights abuses against its own people are as likely to cast the PRC as “enemy” or “threat” in the American mind. Adding to concerns, a *democratizing* China, one that moves from one-party rule to some form of competitive but poorly institutionalized form of government may prove the most threatening of all.¹² Already a harsh and vocal Chinese nationalism has emerged to criticize the seemingly rational and calculating Chinese Communist Party leadership. A breakdown of Party rule may unleash forces that could shape Chinese foreign policy in new and threatening ways, with significant implications for the United States, its allies and the probability of war in the Pacific.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section will consider U.S.-Chinese relations in the context of prevailing realist theories. Focusing on the power transition in the Western Pacific and China’s rise, it will develop a set of distinct mechanisms that could lead to a military conflict between the two powers. The second section will shift to employ a defensive realist analysis of the regional security environment in the Western Pacific. Considering the geography and military

⁷ Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001).

⁹ Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Richard Rosecrance and Arthur Stein, *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Bown and Company, 1977).

¹¹ Michael E. Brown, Sean Lynn-Jones, Steven Milller (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1996).

¹² Jack Levy, “Domestic Politics and War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18: 4(Spring 1988).



technology of the region and focusing on the nature of the security dilemma between the United States and its major allies and the PRC, it is striking how smaller clashes could nonetheless lead to a larger conflict and how present force postures and perceptions of military doctrines increase the probability of major war. The third section will turn to domestic or unit-level factors within the two states. It will consider the relevance of key hypotheses related to the liberal or democratic peace theory and also consider the impact of a potential democratization on Chinese foreign policy and its implications for the region. While high levels of interdependence on specific economic and financial dimensions may indeed give leaders pause in the event of a conflict, it seems unlikely to overcome belligerent impulses driven by a lack of ideological affinity and negative perceptions. A brief conclusion will assess the findings of the research and consider ways to dampen potential flashpoints and pathways to conflict.

Realism and Power Transitions: The Inevitability Great Power Conflict?

In an anarchic world inhabited by sovereign states with only themselves to depend upon for their survival, competition is a fact of life. Great powers must be acutely concerned with the accumulation of power by potential rivals and concerned with the growth of their neighbors. The system is rife with fear and uncertainty, and therefore states will actively pursue their own security interests and work to prevent the emergence or expansion of a competitor wherever possible.¹³ Clearly, in the Western Pacific, the single most important dynamic has been China's rapid economic expansion over the past two decades, dramatically increasing its relative power and in doing so achieving the de facto position of regional power. However, given the existence of other powers in the regional most notably Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) and smaller states like the Philippines with alliance relations with the United States, China's rise, including its recent military modernization, has taken place without sparking a regional conflict. In fact, the presence of U.S. security guarantees to Tokyo, Seoul, and Manila have arguably done much to dampen concerns about the growth of Chinese power within the region and has allowed Beijing to achieve great power status in a remarkably short period of time precisely because of the stabilizing force of the united States in the region.¹⁴ As a global hegemon since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has focused on more direct and pressing security threats, such as the ongoing war on terrorism and intervention in the Middle East. America has also largely benefitted in material terms from China's incorporation into the global economic system, which having been largely constructed by the United States and built upon the foundation of U.S. security guarantees has served U.S. interests during the Cold War and throughout the period of so-called "globalization" in its aftermath.

¹³ John J. Mearsheimer, "False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* (Winter, 1994-95).

¹⁴ Joseph Nye, "East Asian Security: The Case for Deep Engagement," *Foreign Affairs* 74: 4 (July/August 1995). On the Taiwan Straits Crisis, see: Robert S. Ross, "The 1995/1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and Use for Force," *International Security* 25:2 (Fall 2000).



It also made great strategic sense, from Beijing's perspective, to downplay any potential for conflict with the prevailing unipolar power.¹⁵ With the exception of the 1996 Taiwan Straits crisis, which reaffirmed U.S. military preeminence but also significantly shaped subsequent Chinese military strategy and force development choices, relations between Beijing and Washington have been largely positive.¹⁶ Integrating China's massive domestic market into the world economy and facilitating the CCP's efforts to modernize China's domestic economic and social-political systems seemed largely beneficial for the United States and the region. Unsurprisingly, much of China's diplomatic and foreign policy during the 1990s and early 2000s consisted of a largely soft-line, reassuring policy toward smaller regional neighbors and developing and strengthening relationships in the developing world. The era of China's growing "soft power" expanded its prestige and global footprint by fostering economic, financial, and trade opportunities with African, Latin American, and Southeast Asian nations.¹⁷

At the same time, however, Beijing also embarked on an impressive and extensive military modernization program. Initially, this modernization seemed to focus on improving its ability to coerce Taiwan, whether to deter a future government in Taipei from unilaterally declaring independence from China, or compelling a reversal of such policy through the targeted use of punitive force.¹⁸ The development of a large number of increasingly sophisticated missile systems and improvements in strike aircraft made up much of the initial buildup. These capabilities would likely give the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) air superiority in a cross-Straits conflict and could also potentially hold U.S. forces in the immediate region at risk. Whether considering U.S. naval assets afloat near the Taiwan Straits or U.S. Air Force strike aircraft at bases like Kadena in Japan, the American capacity to effectively respond to an attack on Taiwan would be seriously compromised.¹⁹ U.S. experts grew concerned about whether this shifting balance within a potential Taiwan theater could undermine U.S. deterrence and make a Chinese move more likely.²⁰

In more recent years, China's military buildup has seemingly moved well beyond acquiring and deploying the capabilities to deter and/or compel Taiwan toward the development of a robust capacity to project power in its region and possibly beyond. Further quantitative and qualitative improvements in attack aircraft, surface combatants, and attack submarines have drawn concern about China's intentions and the potential for the PLAN to challenge the U.S. Navy in the Pacific.

¹⁵ Ethan B. Kaptstein and Michael Mastanduno (eds.) *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ David Shambaugh (ed), *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ James C. Mulvenon, et al., *Chinese Responses to U.S. Military Transformation and Its Implications for the Department of Defense* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation 2006).

¹⁹ David A. Shlapak, et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Confrontation and Options for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation 2009).

²⁰ Roger Cliff, et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation 2007).



ic.²¹ Two high profile weapons programs, the so-called “carrier killer” anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) and the deployment of China’s first aircraft carrier (with the construction of a second underway) typify the perception of China’s growing “blue water” naval capabilities.²² Taken with the recent Chinese behavior in the East and South China Seas discussed above and these concerns about a real and growing Chinese threat to U.S. security interests in Asia seem difficult to dismiss.

The leading scholar of the offensive realist school, John Mearsheimer, has already written that war between the United States and China is all but inevitable.²³ As a rising power seeking regional (if not global) hegemony, China clearly views the United States as the primary obstacle to its long-term objective. It is difficult to discern a specific mechanism or pathway from offensive realist logic to explain why China may more risk acceptant in challenging the United States and thus more willing to risk a major war, but in the rational and strategic calculations of the leadership in Beijing the shifting balance of military power within in the region may provide a window of opportunity to banish the United States from the region.²⁴ So in general terms the rising regional power views an opportunity provided by a favorable shift in military power to initiate a conflict with the prevailing or status quo power with the objective of ejecting that power from the region and achieving hegemony over its weaker neighbors. This is certainly a plausible story, but it remains somewhat general in its predictive utility.

Similarly, much of the power transition literature seems to capture the general contours of a potential U.S.-China rivalry, and would similarly predict a conflict or even major war between the two.²⁵ However, it is relatively unclear which state would necessarily initiate the conflict. Power transition theory seems to place the onus of the responsibility for conflict with the rising state, which is unsatisfied with the nature of the existing international order (set up by the prevailing hegemon and its status quo allies) and thus presses against that order and eventually attempts to forcibly revise it, causing the status quo defenders to respond, ultimately leading to war. Gilpin’s hegemonic war model presents a persuasive description of how a relatively stable hegemonic system can be destabilized, devolving into increasingly polarized coalitions, until crisis leads to system-changing war, but again fails to provide a specific explanation for why one state — whether the challenger or the threatened leader — would strike the first blow.²⁶

A useful synthetic argument has been offered by Copeland, who focuses on the perceptions of power of the relevant great powers and constructs a model of preventive war motivations driving a declining power to initiate crises with a willingness to launch a major war while it maintains a

²¹ Ronald O’Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Naval Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2016)

²² Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, “On the Verge of a Game Changer,” *Proceedings* 135: 5 (2009).

²³ John J. Mearsheimer, “Can China Rise Peacefully?” *The National Interest*, October 25, 2014.

²⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001).

²⁵ A. F. K. Organiski, *World Politics* 2nd Edition (New York: Knopf 1968), Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980), Ronald Tammen, Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House 2000).

²⁶ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Gilpin “Theory of Hegemonic War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18: 4 (Spring 1988).



favorable position vis-à-vis its primary adversary.²⁷ This model makes intuitive sense: why would a rational leadership attack when it perceived itself to be the weaker power? It would be irrational for a rising power to initiate hostilities against a leading power until it surpassed the leader. It may live in fear of being attacked, understanding the preventive pressures on the leading-but-declining state, but it should do as much as possible to postpone a conflict until it was confident that it was in the ascendance. The declining leader may indeed have incentives to initiate conflict when it has an upper hand, but we would not expect a rising state to do so. Copeland's insights are particularly applicable to the U.S.-China case. Of course it is highly unlikely that the United States, even in decline, would ever launch a preventive war on China. With its alliances in the region, U.S. power is amplified and so long as Japan and South Korea prefer to balance against China and refuse to appease or bandwagon with the growing regime, the United States will maintain a relatively strong position in the region even if its own relative power declines.

A more plausible enactment of “dynamic differentials” theory would envision a shocking and precipitous decline in China's power. Perhaps due to a serious economic contraction or societal upheaval spurred by a significant reversal of China's slow and steady path to economic and political development, Beijing would face a difficult choice. Confronted with a deep and potentially irreversible decline in their relative power, Chinese leaders may view a rapidly closing window of opportunity to push the United States out of the region permanently. The actual nature of the military campaign may not envision a large-scale war between the two powers, but could involve a limited action that removes U.S. power projection capabilities in the region. The result would be a *fait accompli* that Washington would be forced to accept to undertake a major war to overturn. Of course, no operation would likely be so clean and surgical, and the uncertainties and ambiguities relative to the response of U.S. allies and the larger international community are significant and potentially decisive. But faced with a choice of declining in power and losing the capability to change the status quo in the foreseeable future, Chinese leaders may take more risks to alter that status quo while it is in the best position to do so.

The common insight provided by offensive realist approaches is that times of a change in relative power are dangerous and war prone. Leaders are acutely sensitive to the capabilities of their state and to the relative capabilities of potential rivals. While the United States remains the preeminent global power, the balance of power in the Western Pacific — particularly in terms of military power — has seemingly shifted in China's favor. With strong allies like Japan and South Korea, the United States remains in a strong position, but China has seemingly entered a period where its leaders recognize its relative strength and improving position vis-à-vis its neighbors and is increasingly risk acceptant in pushing against the existing status quo. Its declaration of the ADIZ in the East China Sea and the reclamation and fortification of possessions in the South China seem to be evidence of this. How far China will continue to engage in risky provocative behavior is unclear, but given the perception that China has achieved a favorable balance of power within the region, it is likely that Beijing will continue on its new assertive path.

²⁷ Dale C. Copeland, *Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2001).



The Security Dilemma in the Western Pacific: Instability and Spiral Dynamics

As many scholars have written, it would seem that the security environment in the Western Pacific should be relatively benign.²⁸ As opposed to the continental powers sharing border in relative close proximity, and thus facing direct threats and potential vulnerabilities from the military forces of neighbors, maritime regions should be relatively peaceful.²⁹ The sheer difficulties inherent in amphibious operations and transportation of large numbers of men and material across oceans present formidable hurdles for the conquest of oceanic states. Even analyses that place far less emphasis on the relative importance of military technology and geography to explaining the probability of military conflict privilege the “stopping power of water” to mitigating political disagreements.³⁰

However, technology has seemingly outstripped the geographic constraints on conflict in maritime regions and provided states with the capacity to project power and conduct offensive operations against each other.³¹ This is not simply to say that states can engage in potentially costly naval warfare, something that has always been possible. Moreover, given the proximity of the states in the East and Southeast Asian regions, punitive air campaigns and strategic bombing have been realities since the 1920s. What is different now is that the quantitative and qualitative expansion of China’s missile forces, in concert with growing air and naval capabilities provide Beijing with a substantial and growing capacity to coerce and compel its smaller neighbors and also to deter them from responding to Chinese provocations, leaving open the possibility for Beijing to engage in a policy of successive *fait accomplis*. Of course, this depiction of the security environment deliberately ignores the presence of the United States in the Western Pacific, but it underscores the shifting balance of military capabilities in the region and the perception of threat that China poses to its neighbors. Last decade, it was primarily Taipei that faced this deteriorating security situation. Now certainly Manila, given the sheer imbalance in Philippine military power and national capacity relative to Beijing, and perhaps even Tokyo face a similarly troubling strategic picture.³²

Unfortunately, the presence of the United States, whether assessed in terms of short-range strike aircraft deployed to bases across the East and Southeast Asia or U.S. Navy surface and subsurface vessels patrolling the vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that carry \$5 trillion of world trade on merchant shipping through the South China Sea, does not seem to provide the deterrent or even dampening effect many observers have come to expect. As discussed above, Beijing’s recent turn to a more “assertive” foreign policy, particularly in addressing disputed territories also claimed by much smaller neighbors, has sparked concerns that the U.S. forces in the re-

²⁸ The logic of defensive realism and the security dilemma can be found in: Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30: 2 (1978), Charles L. Glaser, “The Security Dilemma Revisited,” *World Politics* 50: 1 (1997).

²⁹ Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?” *International Security* 35: 1 (Summer 2010).

³⁰ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

³¹ Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1999).

³² Evan Medeiros et al., *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China’s Rise* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation 2008).



gion may no longer play the robust deterrent role they once did.³³ Several studies have assessed the conventional military balance in the region, and most agree that China has achieved a localized military superiority in some key areas. First and foremost, China's investment in thousands of conventional short- and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles has effectively overturned what has been one of the United States military advantages in the region: the proximity of short-range strike aircraft.³⁴ The new reality is that many of the major U.S. air bases that would typically be considered for use in a conflict between the PRC and Taiwan are now well-within range of a Chinese missile barrage that could effectively take those base "off-line" at a time in the campaign where air support to Taiwan may prove decisive, given the high likelihood that the ROC Air Force would likely be the primary target of Chinese missiles and removed from the battle in its early stages.³⁵

Kadena Air Force Base in Japan, which would be vital to mounting an effective U.S. response to a potential Taiwan Straits conflict could be targeted with quantities of ballistic and cruise missiles that would crater runways, destroy aircraft on the ground, and devastate fixed critical installations like hangars or fuel tanks. Depending upon the nature and number of missile salvos, the base may be capable of returning to some capacity after a period of time, but U.S. planners must now consider that a coordinated PLA attack on Taiwan may also involve rendering Kadena unusable and thus greatly complicating U.S. efforts to support Taipei's defense.³⁶ While Andersen Air Force Base on Guam remains out of the range of China's short-range ballistic missiles, the hub of U.S. forces in the western Pacific is increasingly under threat by China's growing arsenal of medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles and land-attack and air-launched cruise missiles, which is reportedly highly accurate even over significant ranges. Executing operations from Andersen would be difficult given its distance from the theater of operations, but an attack that also degraded the capacity of this important installation could prove decisive in terms limiting the capacity of the United States to respond effectively in a relevant time frame.³⁷

Having received the most notoriety, China's investment and development of an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM), the DF-21 which has been ominously termed "the carrier killer" clearly signals the PLA's focus on the second source of U.S. military power in the region: Aircraft Carrier task forces.³⁸ Experts have concluded that PLA strategists and planners learned from 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis that Chinese forces required a capability to push American force back beyond a distance where Chinese territory could not be threatened. During the crisis, U.S. carriers were dispatched to the waters around Taiwan to deter a possibly Chinese attack following provocative missile launches by Beijing thought to influence Taiwan's elections. The "lesson" of the crisis (reinforced by other episodes of U.S. power projection from the 1990 Gulf War through the NATO

³³ Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37: 4 (Spring 2013).

³⁴ Shlapak et al., *A Question of Balance*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Heginbotham, *The U.S. China Military Scorecard*

³⁸ Erickson and Yang, "On the Verge of a Game Changer,"



intervention in the Balkans) was that the United States could not be allowed to approach Chinese territory uncontested. With little fear to their Carrier Strike Groups, U.S. Naval leaders could launch airstrikes and cruise missile barrages with impunity at a safe distance from their targets. Thus, while Chinese modernization efforts initially focused on deterring the United States from repeating its actions during the 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis, the investment in the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of China's missile forces, combined with growing numbers of fighter and strike aircraft, surface and (particularly) subsurface warfare vessels, and the PRC now confronts the United States with a formidable Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capability that threatens to impose serious costs on U.S. military forces operating in maritime areas or airspace near Chinese territory. This "contested zone" now has grown from the area around Taiwan to the East and South China Seas. U.S. naval and air forces operating within these zones are now at significant risk whether they are based on allied territory or afloat at sea. While Beijing's efforts have improved the quantitative balance of forces, the truly important impact of its modernization program is that China has significantly altered the military balance in the region in a qualitative way.³⁹

The central implication of the development of a robust Chinese A2/AD capacity in the areas adjacent to its expansive coastline is that the nature of the security environment within the East and South China Sea regions have shifted from relatively defensive to offensive in a relatively short period of time.⁴⁰ While a general observer may look at the larger strategic balance between the United States and characterize it as highly defensive (or more accurately deterrent dominant) given the presence of nuclear weapons and assured retaliation, and the sheer expanse of the Pacific Ocean which ensures that neither country could ever invade the other, the focus should be on the Western Pacific.⁴¹ Looking at the areas of the East and South China Seas, and considering the primary regional actors as China, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, and the United States, the security environment is anything but defensive. In fact, given the nature of military technology, states in this region are faced with strong and increasing pressures to strike first in the event of a crisis simply for fear of being severely harmed in the event of being hit first. To be clear, the existence of maritime boundaries serve as a de facto buffer zone against actual invasion, but the existence of China's formidable missile arsenal is highly threatening to military assets of the United States in the western Pacific as well as the military installations, sovereign territory and even population centers of its key regional allies. Moreover, while the East and South China Seas may provide some dampening effect on the likelihood for conflict, the specific nature of these regions also provide a variety of potential flashpoints for conflict, and while they may require deliberate or inadvertent political or military escalation to truly constitute a military crisis that threatens serious harm on one or more of the actors involved, the underlying offensive nature of the security envi-

³⁹ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Robert Work, *Meeting the Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenge* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments 2003), Cliff, et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair*.

⁴⁰ Van Evera, Causes of War, Van Evera "Offense, Defense and the Causes of War," *International Security* 22:4 (Spring 1998).

⁴¹ M. Taylor Fravel and Evan Medeiros, "China's Search for Assured Retaliation: Explaining the Evolution of China's Nuclear Strategy," *International Security* 35:2 (Fall 2010)



ronment in the region means that the probability of conflict increases with each diplomatic or political crisis.

Crisis Instability

It has been fortunate that during the time that China's military capabilities have expanded that relations with Taiwan have remained relatively positive. However, if politics in Taipei threatened to open up the possibility of a declaration of independence or some other perceived violation of the "one-China" policy, there is little reason to believe that Beijing would not react in a way similar to the 1996 crisis. The brandishing of military force in the form of missile launches over the island and the mobilization of air and naval forces would send a clear signal of the CCP leadership's discontent with the course of events on the island. The United States may similarly signal its willingness to oppose a unilateral alteration of the political status quo by Chinese military force, but the movement of U.S. Naval forces into the region and the alerting of regional bases will only further the pressures on the Chinese leadership to seize the initiative.

Crisis (or first-strike) stability assumes that under highly stressful crisis conditions, neither state would have incentives to strike first.⁴² The most obvious example is the attainment of assured destruction capabilities by both the United States and Soviet Union in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Sufficient quantitative levels of warheads, deployed on different delivery vehicles with different protections (hardened silos or road mobile missiles, submarines, and bombers) assured each state that the other would have sufficient numbers of warheads to guarantee a devastating second strike regardless of the effectiveness of a coordinated first-strike. There were arguments and disagreements about how robust this balance of terror actually was, and how much was enough to signal assured destruction, but the key insight is that neither state would logically entertain launching a first strike because no advantage could be achieved.

At the strategic level, China's relatively modest investments in a deterrent force have led some experts to question whether the United States could enjoy a preponderance in strategic forces that could make a first-strike possible.⁴³ However, extensive Chinese efforts to protect those forces would seem to make such considerations much less attractive. But despite these efforts to safeguard the PRC's nuclear forces, there are potential pathways where a diplomatic crisis that precipitates an actual military conflict between the United States and China does introduce the potential for escalation dynamics that could lead to the nuclear threshold.⁴⁴

⁴² Forest E. Morgan, *Crisis Stability and Long-Range Strike: A Comparative Analysis of Fighters, Bombers, and Missiles* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013)

⁴³ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy," *Foreign Affairs* 85: 2 (March/April 2006), Lieber and Press, "The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30: 4 (Spring 2006).

⁴⁴ Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability," *International Security* 40: 2 (Fall 2015), Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).



At the theater level, the development of a robust A2-AD zone has introduced significant first-strike incentives into the calculus of military and political leaders in the event of a potential crisis.⁴⁵ If, for example, a Taiwanese government came to power on the platform of a declaring independence and Beijing reaffirmed its willingness to use military force to avoid such an outcome, both Chinese and U.S. military leaders may face pressures to strike first for fear of being hit first precisely because absorbing a first-strike could be so devastating and decisive. In reality, it is extremely difficult to envision a situation in which the United States would launch a first strike, but knowing that critical air bases are within the A2-AD zone and thus at high risk of being removed from the fight, would press combatant commanders to scramble jets as soon as possible to avoid seeing them destroyed on the ground or unable to launch because of damage to runways.

PLA planners would have strong incentives to strike first in such a scenario.⁴⁶ Utilizing large salvos of ballistic missiles against Taiwan's integrated air defenses (IADs) and air bases, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) would likely achieve air superiority with much of the ROC Air Force (ROCAF) destroyed or severely degraded and vulnerable to follow-on air and missile attacks. This is precisely the point where U.S. air and naval air assets would be viewed as critical to the defense of Taiwan. However, as we have discussed, if a coordinated and sustained missile strike on Kadena achieved Chinese objectives of keeping U.S. forces out of the initial phase of the operation, then Beijing would effectively present the United States and the world with a fait accompli. An major amphibious assault to physically conquer Taiwan may be unlikely (and difficult to execute), but with air superiority, Beijing could ratchet up the punishment on the Taiwanese people, leaving the government in Taipei with an unenviable choice of surrender or sustaining high civilian losses. The United States and its allies would be faced with the decision of mounting a costly military campaign to liberate Taiwan.

In such a scenario, there is thus a real perceived value in seizing the initiative and striking first. This is not lost on U.S. planners, and much of the doctrinal or programmatic countermeasures that have been discussed focus on attempting to improve effectiveness of platforms and munitions in contested A2-AD zones. Unfortunately, many of them would seemingly exacerbate, rather than dampen, potential first-strike dynamics and would further undermine crisis stability.

Arms Race Instability

The United States has only begun to develop programmatic responses to China's military modernization, and many experts view the United States as significantly behind China's progress. Investments in both base hardening and diversification are sensible but necessarily take time. In the short-term, investments in theater missile defense (TMD) systems, particularly the Navy Aegis capable destroyers and cruisers, may partially offset China's quantitative advantage in conven-

⁴⁵ Avery Goldstein, "First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S. China Relations," *International Security* 37: 4 (Spring 2013).

⁴⁶ Shlapak, et al., *A Question of Balance*, Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard*.



tional short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. However, U.S. quantities of interceptors are limited and would likely be exhausted and overwhelmed in a large-scale coordinated Chinese missile attack. In addition, considering more recent deployments of submarines and fighter aircraft, and the construction of a robust A2-AD zone in China's littoral boundaries, China now confronts U.S. planners with real difficulties in developing effective options for conducting military operation early in a potential conflict scenario.

Discussions among defense experts have focused on the development and acquisition of platforms and munitions that are either capable of operating within a highly contested A2-AD environment or can operate at greater ranges that will allow them to avoid the risk created by China's modernization efforts.⁴⁷ The underlying challenge in addressing either approach is the technical feasibility of existing and likely programs. There simply do not seem to be robust solutions, considering existing military technology (and cost constraints), to significantly enhance the survivability of existing platforms or the stand-off effectiveness of existing and planned munitions to erode the "home field" advantage that China has seemingly achieved.

Certain platforms like the U.S. Navy's Ohio-Class (SSGN) submarines refurbished with vertical launch tubes for Tomahawk land attack cruise missiles (LACM) provides a formidable capability in an A2-AD environment, but with only four of these vessels (scheduled to be retired over the next decade) and limited reserves of cruise missiles in the region its overall contribution in a conflict would be limited. In addition, given China's investments in advanced attack submarines, the subsurface realm may become increasingly contested as well. Moreover, despite improvements targeting and guidance in the Tomahawk cruise missile, the munitions are best used against fixed targets like airbases, command and control nodes, and other installations. The greatest offensive threat — and primary target of U.S. forces — in a conflict scenario would be China's fleet of mobile transporter erector launchers (TELs) carrying short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. Once dispersed into the field under contested conditions, there seems to be little in the U.S. arsenal that can address these systems. Given the importance of maintaining uninterrupted intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to target mobile Chinese forces, the likely presence of significant Chinese electronic warfare (EW) and cyber-warfare capabilities that may further hinder U.S. operations in a contested A2-AD environment only complicates this key task.

Another platform that may prove capable of contributing to mounting an effective campaign in a contested, advanced A2-AD environment would be a penetrating long-range strike bomber (LRSB), like the stealth B-2 Lancer.⁴⁸ Given the nature of Chinese IADs, even these formidable bombers may be increasingly at risk, but their combination of range, stealth, and precision-guided munitions would present a challenge for Chinese planners. However, the United States Air Force only possesses twenty of these highly capable platforms in operation, and this quantitative

⁴⁷ Jan Van Tol, et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure Operational Concept* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

⁴⁸ Mark A. Gunzinger, *Sustaining America's Advantage in Long-Range Strike* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments) 2010.



limitation significantly limits the potential contribution of the B-2 in the event of a crisis or early in a military conflict. This, in part, has spurred the Defense Department to prioritize the development and acquisition of a new LSRB in greater quantities than the current B-2 fleet, but the program has only begun.

Other options to improve the United States position only seems to underscore the difficulties of the Chinese A2-AD challenge.⁴⁹ For example, focusing resources of fielding longer-range standoff munitions, perhaps improving on the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) mounted on B-1 bombers would improve the U.S. ability to bring firepower to bear in the event of a conflict, but would again, be operating outside of the contested zone and would be relegated to destroying fixed targets. The quantitative improvement of U.S. standoff munitions, whether on SSGNs or long-range aircraft may enhance the U.S. capacity to deter China through the threat of punishment on the margins, but the it does little to improve the capacity of the United States to deny China from achieving its objectives early in a crisis, particularly if Beijing is able to execute a coordinated missile strike. This highlights an important common problem with current U.S. options: the assumption of hitting fixed targets, and a more general recourse to a conventional second-strike against China in the event of a military conflict would necessarily involve attacking targets on the Chinese mainland, which introduces potentially dangerous escalation dynamics. This will be discussed in the next section. But it is important to note that most short-term efforts to address the perceived imbalance may have little effect on Beijing's calculus but could dramatically alter the course of the conflict.

In the longer-run, experts grappling with the A2-AD challenge have discussed a variety of possible alternatives to improve U.S. capabilities to deter and if necessary defend against Chinese aggression in the region. Perhaps to most radical is expressed in various statements of what has been called AirSea Battle (ASB).⁵⁰ While proponents argue that ASB is only an “operational concept” and not a military strategy or doctrine, the recently released Joint Operation Access Concept (JOAC) seems to incorporate a number of ideas and potential logical implications of AirSea Battle.⁵¹ At its core, ASB seems predicated on combatting China within the A2-AD zone to avoid being pushed out or degraded to the point of being unable to mount a robust defense in the early phase of a military campaign. The programmatic implications of this would seem to focus on the development, acquisition and deployment of highly survivable platforms operating out of hardened, geographically diversified forward bases, predicated on the maintenance of robust C4ISR capabilities. U.S. forces would prove capable of surviving any coordinated first-strike and sustaining air-to-air and strike operations despite Chinese defenses. A central challenge would be the development of a capability that could hold China's mobile missile forces at risk.

One such candidate program would be a conventional land-based intermediate range ballistic

⁴⁹ David W. Kearns, Jr., *Facing the Missile Challenge: U.S. Strategy and the Future of the INF Treaty* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2012).

⁵⁰ Van Tol, et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure Operational Concept* and Krepinevich, Jr., *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

⁵¹ David W. Kearns, Jr., “Air-Sea Battle and China Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenge,” *Orbis* (Winter 2014).



cruise missile (IRBM).⁵² This would represent a “high-end” programmatic response to the A2-AD threat that would ostensibly address several of the challenges confronting the United States today. First, its speed and survivability would potentially allow it to hold China’s mobile missile TELs at risk. Provided that U.S. forces maintain robust C4ISR capabilities in the event of a conflict, ballistic missiles fired from bases in the region may indeed significantly enhance the firepower that U.S. combatant commanders can reliably depend upon even if short-range strike aircraft capabilities are severely degraded.

The United States is currently prohibited from developing such missiles under the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, but assuming that the Treaty could be altered or abrogated, a future development and deployment of these missiles could have major ramifications for U.S. relations with China.⁵³ Given the operational ranges of the Western Pacific, and the necessary accuracy of a conventional missile, a new IRBM would necessarily be a highly costly program, and a very costly signal of U.S. intentions vis-à-vis its position in the region. The commitment to introduce a weapon system that would severely undermine the “home field” defensive advantage that Chinese military leaders have worked to achieve is likely to trigger a serious erosion of relations, perhaps even sparking a diplomatic crisis. Moreover, the planned introduction of these potentially decisive missiles into the theater could create incentives for China to act before the perceived balance shifts away from their favor and exploit the perceived existing window of opportunity to achieve its objective while it has the greatest probability of success. In addition, depending on the planned size of the deployment, these new highly-capable U.S. theater missiles would be dedicated to targets on the Chinese mainland, including mobile targets like TELs, but also fixed targets like air bases, support installations, and command and control nodes. They would thus constitute a potential threat to China’s strategic deterrent forces, and perhaps even to the regime itself. Delineating between strictly military targets and those that may be perceived in Beijing a vital for regime survival may be difficult in the fog of war. Thus, escalation dynamics enter the discussion again.

A less ambitious but significant approach to responding to the China’s military modernization over the longer-term focuses on the reversal of the current military situation and constructing an A2-AD zone that would confront Chinese military leaders with a contested zone outside of its immediate coastal and littoral zones. In what has been termed “archipelagic defense,” planners envision the United States and its allies utilizing the unique geography of the Western Pacific, particularly the so-called “First Island Chain” to create a de facto barrier that would contain China within the East and South China Seas. The deployment of relatively inexpensive anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) to bases dispersed on territories of Japan, the Philippines could create a “no-go zone” for Chinese military and (if necessary) merchant shipping in the event of a crisis or conflict.⁵⁴

⁵² David W. Karn, Jr., “The Future of US Deterrence in East Asia: Are Conventional Land-Based IRBMs a Silver Bullet?” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7:4 (Winter 2013)

⁵³ Karn, *Facing the Missile Challenge*.

⁵⁴ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., “How to Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense,” *Foreign Affairs* 94:2 (March/April 2015)



Archipelagic defense seems to have several political-military and diplomatic advantages over AirSea Battle. First, in focusing on creating an A2-AD zone outside of China's and not directly placing highly offensive assets targeting assets on the mainland, this approach avoids ASB's most destabilizing and escalatory elements. Closely related, it also avoids the highly difficult and complex problem of basing offensive weapons on allied territory, thus asking them to assume a greater burden in the likely event of a conflict and potentially sparking domestic political resistance among their populations. These potential strains on alliance relations cannot be understated. Cruise missile batteries can be more easily dispersed and potentially create a less obtrusive footprint and would greatly complicate Chinese planning, clearly raising the expected costs of a Chinese attack on its neighbors but without targeting the regime or the mainland.⁵⁵ In this way, an implementation of archipelagic defense may prove a rationale countermeasure should negotiations on the future of the South China Sea fail or Beijing's continued assertiveness in the East and South China Seas.

Nonetheless, both AirSea Battle and Archipelagic Defense are likely to spark arms race dynamics. While the latter may be far less provocative to Chinese leaders than the former, both would represent a shift in U.S. priorities in the region and would likely signal a real erosion of U.S.-China relations. A deployment of conventional theater missiles could spark a range of Chinese programs, from further quantitative expansions in short- and medium-range missiles, to a shift away from a limited "assured retaliation" strategic posture to a more robust posture.⁵⁶ While Archipelagic Defense may prove less directly threatening to Chinese planners, it could nonetheless spark further investments by the PLAN in additional submarines, an area which is already troubling U.S. planners. In short, while China's modernization program has clearly had an impact on the conventional military balance in the region, these responses by the United States are likely to exacerbate arms race instability and increase the probability of Chinese investments.

Pathways to Escalation

In the abstract, the geography of the Western Pacific would seemingly constrain escalation dynamics between the United States as a maritime power and the Peoples Republic of China as a continental power. However, as the previous discussion has clearly explained, China's military modernization, culminating the deployment of a robust A2-AD zone in its immediate littoral area, coupled with U.S. forward basing, naval presence and alliance commitments in the region have created an offensive security environment, with significant crisis instability. As the previous discussion underscores, much of the current U.S. operational planning to prosecute a military conflict against China, most notably a potentially large-scale conventional conflict in the Taiwan Straits, seems predicated on strikes against targets on the Chinese mainland. Moreover, many of

⁵⁵ Terrence K. Kelly, Anthony Adler, Todd Nichols, and Lloyd Thrall, *Employing Land-Based Anti-Ship Missiles in the Western Pacific* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation 2013).

⁵⁶ Cunningham and Fravel, "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability."



the potential “remedies” to the current challenge of China’s A2-AD capability, such as the deployment of IRBMs and/or the implementation of a version of the AirSea Battle Concept explicitly target mobile missiles, command and control and other elements of China’s military infrastructure. This creates a dangerous threshold to escalation.⁵⁷

As the current security situation indicates, Chinese military leaders have focused explicitly on pushing U.S. forces away from their immediate littorals in order to prevent strikes against the mainland. Whether holding short-range strike aircraft deployed at forward bases in the region at risk in the early stages of a conflict or developing and deploying capabilities to credibly threaten U.S. Navy carrier strike groups, the most visible symbol of U.S. military power) from operating with impunity in the Western Pacific, the PLA has made significant strides in achieving this objective. If the United States plans to deny China a sanctuary from which to execute military operations and directly threaten this Chinese priority and the potential for both rational and inadvertent escalation increases.⁵⁸

First, in the event of a military conflict arising from a crisis over Taiwan or another serious flashpoint in the region, and Chinese forces launch a coordinated by only partially successful operation against U.S. forces, the American military response will likely involve attacking military targets on China’s mainland.⁵⁹ However, as U.S. forces degrade China’s military forces, particularly its missile forces and command and control nodes, Chinese leaders may perceive their central deterrent capabilities under threat or perhaps may fear that a military failure will result in the loss of Taiwan. In either case, there may be strong incentives for the Chinese leadership to threaten nuclear escalation in order to avoid being potentially disarmed of its deterrent and forced to accept an “unacceptable” post-conflict settlement. Beijing may therefore seek to “de-escalate” the conflict and halt any perceived advances by United States forces and minimize perceived losses.

Second, facing a similar scenario in which U.S. and allied forces have effectively conducted a counter-offensive against target on the Chinese mainland, it is not clear that operational control of Chinese strategic forces would remain in the hands of the CCP leadership in Beijing. Organizational analyses of the PLA are unclear about the level of control or devolution of decision-making under conflict conditions. The risk of a commander taking initiative and launching a nuclear missile in the event of a perceived decapitation of the regime leadership is certainly within the realm of possibility. In an intense fog of war, exacerbated by cyberattacks and electronic warfare operations intended to “blind” or “dazzle” and enemy forces, disputing command and control and potentially delinking combatant commanders from the political leadership, these risks and dangers would only seem to grow. While the nuclear-armed deterrent component of the Chinese missile force (the Second Artillery) is geographically separate from the conventional missile forces that would most likely be engaged in a military conflict, the degradation of Chinese C4ISR capabilities and the potentially erosion of operation control of its nuclear deterrent forces should be a prima-

⁵⁷ Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation 2008).

⁵⁸ Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁵⁹ Kearn, Air-Sea Battle and China’s Anti-Access Area Denial Challenge.”



ry concern of U.S. planners.

A defensive realist analysis, focusing on the nature of the security dilemma the Western Pacific and the influence of prevailing military technology and geography, provides a more precise depiction of the perceived threats and incentives confronting the United States and PRC. Interacting with the rise of Chinese power in the past two decades and the perceived decline in U.S. power, this analysis does not paint an optimistic picture.⁶⁰ Even assuming rational actors driven by concerns for security may find themselves pressed to consider a first-strike in the event of a diplomatic crisis and a military conflict opens pathways to intentional and inadvertent escalation. One final pathway to conflict would relax the rationality assumption, and focus specifically on the preferences of the regime in Beijing and the implications of domestic political events within China on the security environment.

Domestic Origins of a Western Pacific Conflict

At first glance, many theoretical analyses that focus on domestic or unit level factors would paint a more optimistic picture of the trajectory of U.S.-China relations over the next decade.⁶¹ Over the past two decades, China's economic expansion has been remarkable and successive leaders in Beijing have shepherded the nation's integration into the world economy, as underscored by China's ascension to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Moreover, bilateral economic cooperation between the United States and PRC has also been extensive. The two leading economic powers in the world have achieved a high level of economic interdependence, particularly in terms of trade, portfolio investment and sovereign debt holdings. Any military conflict between the two has been considered "unthinkable" precisely because to two domestic economies are so intertwined, and powerful interests on both sides of the Pacific would likely agitate against a conflict in the event of a serious crisis. However, high levels of financial or trade interdependence have not prevented states from going to war in the past, and given the potential for diplomatic crisis and pressures to use military force discussed above, it is unclear that domestic constraints against the use of force would be strong enough to avert a conflict.

At the same time, both countries have become much "closer" over the past decade in cosmopolitan terms. From the increasing number of Chinese students studying at American universities to flows of tourists to China, the two peoples have grown to appreciate each others' cultures. Unfortunately, this development has started from a relatively low level and its impact is difficult to measure against long-standing, assumed U.S. diplomatic priorities, likes America's longstanding alliances with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. While much progress has been made, and

⁶⁰ Thomas Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25: 4 (Spring 2001), Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security* 23:4 (Spring 1999).

⁶¹ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph L. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (New York: Longman 1977).



there is a tangible degree of mutual admiration between the two peoples, it is unlikely that these popular views would constrain either government in a decisive way against the use of force in the event of an intense diplomatic crisis.⁶² Moreover, if China was perceived as following its authoritarian impulses and acting against fellow democratic states in Asia, Americans would be more likely to side with the aggrieved states rather than Beijing.⁶³ Neither economic nor cultural or cosmopolitan considerations provide a strong rationale for predicting a peaceful resolution of a conflict. To the contrary, the nature of China's regime makes both current and potential future conflict more likely.

First, the fundamental challenge remains the perception of the CCP-led governmental structure in Beijing. The nature of China's regime remains a clear and unambiguous reminder of its revolutionary and authoritarian past, and despite its economic liberalization and integration into world markets, there remains a high level of uncertainty concerning its intentions and motivations in the foreign policy realm.⁶⁴ In the event of a diplomatic crisis, China's leaders face no visible constraints on their power and with little transparency in decision-making, U.S. leaders may see little evidence that China would forego an opportunistic first-strike if it improved its probability of victory. Uncertainty surround Chinese military decision-making thus introduces the dangerous problem of misperception.⁶⁵ Even if Beijing and Washington prefer a peaceful outcome to a potential crisis, benign signals may be misinterpreted and signals of resolve may be perceived as aggressive and pretext for military action. This problem is compounded by the fact that the CCP may view the outcome of a military conflict as the primary determinant of its survival. For example, if a military conflict broke out over Taiwan and the United States managed to successfully turn the tide of a Chinese attack and conducted operations on mainland targets, fears of regime survival may exacerbate the escalatory dynamics discussed above. Expanding the scope of a potential conflict to American allies Japan or perhaps South Korea or brandishing or utilizing a nuclear weapon may be a means of "gambling for resurrection" and avoiding a catastrophic military defeat which could question the continued legitimacy of the CCP leadership.

Secondly, a democratizing China, one that moves from one-party rule to some form of competitive but poorly institutionalized form of government may prove the most threatening of all.⁶⁶ An extremely harsh and vocal Chinese nationalist movement has emerged to criticize the CCP leadership for failure to implement more aggressive policies vis-à-vis its neighbors and the United

⁶² John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19:2 (Fall 1994).

⁶³ Michael Desch, America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy, *International Security* 32:3 (Winter 2007/08).

⁶⁴ Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views and Commentary on Periphery Diplomacy," *China Leadership Monitor* 44 (Summer 2014), Michael D. Swaine, "Xi Jinping's Address to the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs: Assessing and Advancing Major-Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," *China Leadership Monitor* 46 (Winter 2015).

⁶⁵ Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics* 20:3 (April 1968).

⁶⁶ Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength, and External Conflict," *International Organization* 56:2 (Spring 2002). Robert S. Ross, "China's New Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," *International Security* 34: 2 (Fall 2009).



States. In the face of domestic unrest arising from stalled economic growth or an economic shock, the CCP may embrace much more of a nationalist message to galvanize the people and reestablish its legitimacy and to create a buffer against the criticism from the extreme-nationalist opposition. In this highly volatile situation, Chinese leaders may become significantly more risk-acceptant in foreign policy in order to a stronger image to domestic audiences. Securing the future of Taiwan could become an issue as the CCP and its critics attempt to outdo each other in the nationalism message. Following this troubling dynamic an embattled CCP or a belligerent nationalist successor could therefore both precipitate a diplomatic crisis, over Taiwan or other flash points in the region, and also set the stage for escalation to other states in the region in an expanded conventional conflict or worse. This pathway is particularly troubling precisely because the leadership is seen as highly risk-acceptant and willing to stake its reputation and perhaps political survival on a policy that is fraught with danger and risk.

As the previous discussion has clearly explained, even with rational, security-driven actors directing policy in Beijing and Washington, the possibility of a military conflict arising from a diplomatic crisis is real and increasing.⁶⁷ Relaxing assumptions of rationality and incorporating potential domestic factors like regime survival or the introduction of nationalist pressures within the Chinese domestic political system only exacerbates and complicates these troubling analyses.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper has examined differing pathways that the United States and China may find themselves engaged in a military conflict over the next decade based on models of conflict initiation derived from prevailing theoretical approaches to understanding international relations. While relative power and shifts in that power may provide broad contours that explain competition and rivalry between leading states, an analysis focused on the relevant military technology and geographic realities improves our explanations of how diplomatic crises may lead to military conflict and potentially escalation even to the nuclear threshold. Moreover, while analyses of domestic or unit-level political factors typically paint a more optimistic picture of interstate relations, the nature of China's current authoritarian regime and the growing influence on nationalism do not bode well for the future, particularly if China's economic and political development was to stall.

What seems important at the current time is for U.S., Chinese and regional leaders to address potential sources of conflict. China's territorial disputes with its neighbors, whether with Japan in the East China Sea or the various reefs and features in the South China Sea where China's claims overlap with the Philippines, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations seems to be a natural place to start. Beijing's continuing adherence to a maximalist position only underscores the increasing threat perceived by China's much smaller neighbors, pushing them closer to the United States and reaffirming the need for a robust U.S. military presence in the region. At the same

⁶⁷ James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* (Summer 1995)..



time, U.S. leaders should carefully consider the military responses to China's military modernization and the potential implications for the security environment in the Western Pacific.

Moving forward, it is critical to assess and analyze policy alternatives that could address the problems in U.S.-China relations. Specifically, the discussion of pathways to war should set the stage for further research and discussions on issues and areas where the United States can develop policies, both with its regional allies and (where appropriate) in consultation with Beijing that works to minimize the probability of conflict in the event of a crisis.

- **Requisites for deterrence:** The concept of deterrence was central to understanding the strategic relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Fielding and deploying the requisite capabilities and exhibiting the necessary resolve or political will to utilize those capabilities in the event of provocative behavior (and raising the perceived costs and risks of that behavior to decrease the perceived benefits) was central to the maintenance of peace and stability. However, while direct deterrence (deterring an attack against the U.S. homeland) was relatively straightforward, defense experts and intellectuals in the United States struggled to understand the capabilities and commitments required to achieve effective extended deterrence (deterring an attack against allies in Europe or East Asia).

Today, beginning with the assumption that the underlying relationship between the United States and China is very different from the relationship between the U.S. and Soviet Union, such extended deterrent commitment to Japan and South Korea may be even more difficult as Chinese military power increases. Understanding the respective views of experts in the three allied powers as well as views of Chinese observers (and areas of agreement or divergence) is essential for avoiding the implementation of self-defeating policies and the potential for dangerous misperceptions in future crises.

Important subsidiary questions will focus on the perceived effects of counter-force versus counter-value approaches to deterrence, deterrence by punishment versus denial, and the relative importance of active versus passive defenses under political crisis or military conflict scenarios.

- **Requisites for reassurance:** Closely linked to signaling resolve and the political will to take military action against threats to allies is the signal of reassurance to those allies that potentially costly military action will indeed be taken on their behalf. While formal diplomatic statements and communications may provide some baseline level of reassurance, the presence of military capabilities (from the continued or perhaps expanded basing of U.S. forces to the positioning of advanced weapon systems) is likely to be required to clearly and credibly signal that U.S. involvement in a



future conflict is guaranteed. How are these measures to signal resolve and willingness to actively defend and support allies perceived across the region? Do differences exist in Tokyo and Seoul and perhaps Taipei? How are divergent views interpreted in Beijing? What types of deployments may be most useful for reassuring allies while minimizing potential downside risks or negative implications (as discussed below)?

- **Crisis stability:** Are certain weapons, because of their inherent characteristics, perceived by an adversary as acutely threatening and therefore demanding of targeting in a possible first-strike? Would an adversary see a grave disadvantage in absorbing a first strike to the extent that striking first becomes advantageous? Under the conditions of political crisis, would military leaders have reason to advise first strikes for fear of being hit first and suffering unacceptable consequences? Conversely, are certain weapons seen as primarily tools of retaliation, far less threatening under crisis conditions and only likely to be used in the event of a conflict? Such weapons would seem much more useful for a stable deterrence relationship, increasing perceived costs of attack, without necessarily increasing the threat posed by the adversary.
- **Arms Race Stability:** Are certain types of weapons, whether seen as highly offensive or best used to attack rather than defend, more likely to spur an adversary to build up its own weapons, thus increasing the probability of a crisis and conflict? Conversely, are some weapons viewed as less threatening, and therefore may not spark an adversary to seek to overcome them, whether in quantitative or qualitative terms?

Considering these critical dimensions of any policy choice, the following groups of policy concepts can be considered in the context of U.S.-China relations and maintaining stable and secure relations in the Western Pacific.

- **Weapons policy:** Considering current (and expected) Chinese deployments, what types of systems should the United States and its allies consider in response? What are the foreseeable implications of such choices?
- **Regional Deployments of Manpower and Basing:** What would be the impact of the expansion, contraction or diversification of bases in the region?
- **Diplomatic Initiatives:** Could deterrence be enhanced with the expansion of/ or formalization of specific alliance commitments in the event of conflict? What impact would these have on domestic audiences in alliance countries?



- **Confidence Building Measures:** In the short- to medium-terms, what types of potential bilateral and/or multilateral agreements could be developed decrease the probability conflict or — if necessary — facilitate in the management and mitigation of a potential conflict if one arises?
- **Arms Control Initiatives:** Perhaps in the longer-run, could arms control offer a means through which Washington and Beijing could cooperate to limit the most problematic and potentially destabilizing weapon systems in their respective arsenals, thus contributing to a more stable security environment and contributing to both crisis and arms race stability? ■



Author's Biography

David W. Kearns, Jr.
St. John's University

David W. Kearns, Jr., Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Government and Politics at St. John's University in Queens, New York. During the 2010-2011 Academic Year, Dr. Kearns conducted research at the RAND Corporation in Washington, DC as an inaugural Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow. He is the author of *Facing the Missile Challenge: U.S. Strategy and the Future of the INF Treaty*, (RAND 2011). His research and teaching interests include international relations theory, U.S. Foreign policy, military innovation, comparative grand strategy, arms control and nonproliferation, and the causes of major war. Dr. Kearns is a graduate of Amherst College, holds a Master of Public Policy degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and received his Ph.D. in Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia.

Publications include:

- *Great Power Security Cooperation and Technological Change* (Lexington Books: Lanham, 2014).
- *Facing the Missile Challenge: U.S. Strategy and the Future of the INF Treaty* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, 2012).
- "Toward Alliance or Ambivalence: A Theoretical Assessment of U.S.-India Relations," *India Review* 13:2 (2014) 129-148.
- "Air-Sea Battle and the Challenge of Access," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 36:1 (January-February 2014) 34-43.
- "Air-Sea Battle and China's Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenge," *Orbis* 58: 1 (Winter 2014) 132-146.
- "The Future of US Deterrence in East Asia: Are Conventional Land-Based IRBMs a Silver Bullet?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7:4 (Winter 2013) 93-116.
- "A Hard Case for Soft Power: China's Rise and Security in East Asia," *Journal of Asian Politics and History* 1:3 (Fall 2013) 1-26.
- "The Hard Truths about Soft Power" *Journal of Political Power* 4:1 (March 2011) 65-85.

— From the website of St. John's University and Dr. Kearns's CV

Knowledge-Net for a Better World

- This working paper is the result of the EAI's main academic and educational activity, the *EAI Fellows Program on Peace, Governance, and Development in East Asia*, which is supported by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange of Taiwan, YBM/Korea International School, and W1°. It is presented at the seminars and lectures hosted by partner institutions of the program. Subsequently it is distributed to those audiences. The PDF document of this article can also be viewed via the EAI website by the wider public. Any citation or quotation is prohibited without prior permission of the author and the EAI.
- The EAI Fellows Program is a scholarly exchange program, for the purpose of promoting East Asian studies and encouraging scholarly exchanges among East Asia specialists. For the information about the program, please visit our website, [\[EAI Fellows Program\]](#).
- This paper and other EAI reports can be found on our website, [\[EAI Working Papers\]](#). The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the East Asia Institute.
- Young-Hwan Shin, the Executive Director of EAI Fellows Program
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 107) fellowships@eai.or.kr
- Typeset by Young-Hwan Shin

