

Sharpening the Blunt Layer: Addressing Shortfalls in the Indo-Pacific with Smart Solutions

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14. ABSTRACT As the United States modifies its security posture in the Indo-Pacific according to the four layers of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, several short-term and long-term challenges arise. Rather than attempt to patch together a blunt layer composed of ill-suited legacy systems in the near-term, the U.S. should instead reinforce its contact layer while simultaneously shaping a credible blunt layer consisting primarily of allied and partner forces. This "contact-heavy" approach, made up of three principles, considers U.S. advantages and disadvantages, improves escalation dynamics while maintaining a credible deterrent, and fosters the critical strategic objective of promoting a regional network of partnerships.					
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Despite the absence of overt armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific at the start of the 2020s, the United States' security challenges have never been as murky or problematic. The rise of shadowy geopolitical “gray zone” activities, the decline of the international rules-based order, and the erosion of the U.S. competitive military advantage have conspired to form a daunting strategic conundrum.¹ To address these concerning developments, the Department of Defense (DOD) introduced in its 2018 U.S. *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) a new Global Operating Model consisting of four distinct layers: a *contact* layer, a *blunt* layer, a *surge* layer, and a *homeland* layer.² While the latter two layers generally correspond to the traditional U.S. approach to warfighting, which emphasizes the massing of forces to rollback an aggressor, the first two represent a radical departure from tradition. The contact layer consists of intelligence collection capabilities, such as persistent surface or airborne reconnaissance systems, to prevent the U.S. and its allies from being caught off guard by a rival's clandestine activities in the “gray zone.”³ On the other hand, the blunt layer is intended to deny, degrade, or delay a surprise enemy offensive through force, thus preventing a *fait accompli* and permitting the U.S. to end the conflict on its own terms.⁴ Low-cost, lethal, and resilient systems, such as mobile long-range precision fires systems, ideally fill the blunt layer role. As Mike Gallagher notes, these layers represent an unprecedented shift towards a strategy of deterrence by denial.⁵

Although deterrence by denial is sound in theory, the U.S. has yet to implement the blunt layer concept within the Indo-Pacific in a way that could prevent a miscalculation by a nation as powerful as China. Such a miscalculation, possibly taking the form of a *fait accompli* attempt, could lead to a catastrophic blow to U.S. credibility, a costly war, or both. As Gallagher notes, the key to an effective deterrence by denial strategy is the strength of the defender's denial forces.⁶

The National Defense Strategy Commission, which Congress charged to evaluate the 2018 NDS, recognized that resource shortfalls and unfilled capability gaps threaten the DoD's ability to provide a forward-based, defense-in-depth in the Indo-Pacific.⁷ And while the DoD is making considerable progress toward addressing these shortfalls and capability gaps, it will take years, if not decades, for these changes to reach their full effect. The question then becomes: how can the U.S. best address this immediate blunt layer shortfall within the Indo-Pacific, given its current capabilities and strategic objectives? Rather than attempt to patch together a blunt layer composed of ill-suited legacy systems in the near-term, the U.S. should instead reinforce its contact layer while simultaneously shaping a credible blunt layer consisting *primarily* of allied and partner forces. This "contact-heavy" approach, made up of three principles, considers U.S. advantages and disadvantages, improves escalation dynamics while maintaining a credible deterrent, and fosters the critical strategic objective of promoting a regional network of partnerships.

Breaking Down a "Contact-Heavy" Approach

Although the DoD is on the right track with the overall strategy listed in its 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, does little to address the existing blunt layer shortfall. Its first line of effort, Preparedness, focuses almost exclusively on mid-term and long-term investments. The report describes a wide range of measures to improve its defense posture in the region, including a laundry list of modernization efforts such as the acquisition of new long-range missiles and the development of new operating concepts.⁸ However, several listed munitions are still in development or currently exist in limited numbers,⁹ and the new operating concepts remain ill-defined or untested.¹⁰ Further, the report discusses the idea of "burden sharing," calling on allies and partners to shoulder a "fair share of the burden of responsibility to protect against common

threats.”¹¹ However, the report does little to specify what kind of share this might entail, leaving the door open for little to no cooperation in the blunt layer. As will be discussed later, this possibility will prove highly problematic in terms of cost and risk. Thus, the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report lays out an approach that only addresses the regional security challenges in the long-term.

On the other hand, a “contact-heavy” approach is a near-term solution to address the existing blunt layer gap and consists of three principles. The first principle is to minimize the deployment of U.S. military assets that are ill-suited to perform contact and blunt layer functions because of the unacceptable costs and risks associated with doing so. For example, an aircraft carrier possesses an enormous offensive capability. Yet, it is a poor fit for the blunt layer since its loss during a sudden attack would be a devastating blow and would severely limit U.S. strategic and diplomatic response options. Although an extreme example, it illustrates that just because a system has some of the requisite blunt layer capabilities, other characteristics may negate its strategic value. A sober assessment of the suitability of existing U.S. platforms for the blunt layer would likely disqualify many of the systems that planners would initially consider for such a use. Planners must be able to recognize the inherent limits of certain systems for the niche requirements of the blunt layer, which include a combination of lethality, survivability, and risk-worthiness.

The second principle is to reinforce the contact layer until the blunt layer is sufficiently mature, because an effective contact layer exposes and undermines the “gray zone” activity that precipitates conflict. An example of this would be to increase the deployment of crewed and non-crewed surveillance aircraft to the Indo-Pacific to monitor the activity of known Chinese Maritime Militia vessels. The third principle is to assist allies and partners with the development

of their own blunt layer capability whenever politically and diplomatically feasible. This assistance could take the form of increasing the export of existing and emerging anti-surface and anti-air missile systems or technology to allies such as the Philippines and Japan. When combined, these three principles provide a coherent, near and long-term solution to the blunt layer shortfall facing the DoD today.

Leveraging Asymmetric Advantages

A “contact-heavy” approach in the Indo-Pacific is critical in a long-term, open-ended power competition with China because it leverages U.S. asymmetric advantages. In such a competition, success will require pushing the rivalry out of the adversary’s area of competitive advantage and into one’s own.¹² China has demonstrated that it has embraced this principle by developing effective, low-cost Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) systems that can threaten many exquisite U.S. platforms, such as aircraft carriers. Such systems negate a traditional U.S. advantage and drastically raise the cost of intervention. However, the U.S. enjoys an unmatched network of allies and partners resulting from a shared respect for sovereignty, fair and reciprocal trade, and the rule of law.¹³ This international standing, coupled with the ability to deploy a wide range of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to the Indo-Pacific, enables the U.S. to spotlight Chinese “gray zone” activity for the international community. Faced with this clear U.S. advantage, China has repeatedly and aggressively attempted to dissuade the U.S. from conducting “close-in” surveillance of its activities, such as the harassment of its neighbors’ commercial and military vessels in the South China Sea.¹⁴ Therefore, the U.S. should exploit this advantage by reinforcing the contact layer in the Indo-Pacific and continuing overt, persistent, and legal surveillance of Chinese activity, thereby dissuading Chinese “gray zone” actions and preventing the competition from becoming a conflict.

In the near-term, the U.S. cannot afford to maintain an Indo-Pacific blunt layer by any means other than a “contact-heavy” approach. The Indo-Pacific is clearly an area of advantage for the Chinese in a geographic sense since it forces the U.S. to play a constant and costly “away game.” To make matters worse, the vulnerability of legacy U.S. platforms to Chinese A2/AD systems naturally compels the U.S. to increase its forces to maintain an effective blunt layer, further driving up the cost. The new Dynamic Force Employment (DFE) concept, which theoretically allows the DoD to “do more with less” by deploying and redeploying forces in high states of readiness throughout the globe in response to a crisis, could mitigate this disadvantage. However, the NDS Commission rightly observed that the concept might only place additional strain on an already stretched logistics system.¹⁵ Additionally, several deadly ship collisions in 2017 brought to light that the U.S. Navy surface fleet was overstretched due to high operational demands in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶ Thus, the U.S. is at the edge of falling into the trap which was warned of by Hal Brands: by attempting to project more power, the U.S. will simply create further vulnerabilities by dissipating its resources.¹⁷ When at all possible, the U.S. must reduce the use of legacy platforms, such as its overworked Wasp-class amphibious assault ships, to maintain a disproportionately expensive blunt layer, and instead encourage allies and partners in the region to advance their blunt layer capabilities in the form of long-range anti-ship and anti-air missiles. In doing so, the U.S. minimizes the critical disadvantage of geography and leverages the advantage of its partnerships.

Managing Deterrence and Escalation

A “contact-heavy” approach also addresses the blunt layer shortfall in a way that maintains the same level of deterrence, albeit differently, yet minimizes the risk of escalation. Robert Jervis’ “security dilemma,” which describes the tendency for a state’s defensive efforts to

inadvertently instigate a threatening perception in another,¹⁸ represents a severe challenge to a U.S. deterrence by denial strategy in the Indo-Pacific. In the case of China, there is strong evidence that a perception exists among Chinese senior military officials that all U.S. activity in the region is intended to provoke and undermine Chinese prosperity,¹⁹ despite clear and earnest U.S. messaging of its desire for a constructive and cooperative relationship.²⁰ To minimize the chance of escalation caused by U.S. presence in the region, the U.S. should avoid excessive deployment of platforms with a significant offensive capability. Instead, the U.S. should shift towards increasing the deployment of its contact layer assets, such as the Coast Guard's Legend, Heritage, or Sentinel-class cutters. These vessels, which have minimal offensive capability, are ideal for the contact layer in the maritime environment since their presence offers little chance for provoking military action.

The "contact-heavy" approach's pursuit of a partner-centric blunt layer over the deployment of poor-fitting legacy systems also supports effective deterrence while minimizing the chance for escalation. The key to such a blunt layer is for U.S. allies and partners to develop an A2/AD capability similar to what China employs, albeit on a smaller scale. Advanced anti-surface and anti-air missiles deployed on or near one's own territory are inherently less provocative since they are defensive in nature.²¹ While China might assert that the U.S. could use its forward-deployed blunt layer forces to strike Chinese forces preemptively at the onset of a conflict, it could not claim similar systems in the hands of its smaller neighbors to be so threatening. For example, China might deem a robust U.S. blunt layer present in the South China Sea to be far more incendiary than if the Philippines and other allies maintained much of that capability. This is not to say that the U.S. should attempt to offload all blunt layer

responsibilities to its allies. Instead, the more allies contribute to the blunt layer by employing A2/AD capabilities, the better the escalation dynamics will be.

Demonstrating Trust in Partnerships

Finally, a “contact-heavy” approach is the most straightforward way to demonstrate the U.S. resolve to uphold its chief strategic objective in the region: a free and open Indo-Pacific. It does so first by prioritizing the most significant security challenges facing many nations in the area, those which are taking place in the “gray zone.” Many of these nations, including India, Japan, the Philippines, and several Pacific Island states, face constant Chinese activity that undermines their vital interests, such as illegal fishing within their exclusive economic zones. These subversive activities are difficult to counter because many of these nations lack adequate surveillance capability, even with current U.S. assistance. Therefore, by bolstering the contact layer in the region, the U.S. decreases the likelihood of an unrecognized fait accompli attempt or other subversive activity and provides a practical contribution to enhanced security and economic stability in the Indo-Pacific. Such surveillance assistance empowers individual nations and international communities, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations, to take the lead in responding to illicit activity through legal and diplomatic channels. By adopting this approach, the U.S. will make significant progress towards a multilateral partnership that contributes to regional peace and prosperity.

Another aspect of a “contact-heavy” approach, the development of a partner-centric blunt layer, contributes to a free and open Indo-Pacific by fostering a more multilateral balance of power. Such capability would improve smaller Asian nations’ capacity to collectively deter aggression, enhance regional security, and decrease their reliance on either the U.S. or China. This is not to suggest that the U.S. would expect these nations to address all of their security

concerns independently, nor would it mean that the U.S. would completely withdraw all of its combat credible forces. Instead, this approach answers Indo-Pacific leaders and experts' calls and experts to promote a strong, independent, and resilient region, which will alleviate the pressure on smaller countries to choose sides in the emerging U.S.-China power competition.²² An increasingly multilateral security effort will eventually complement the growing multilateral economic and diplomatic partnerships seen in ASEAN, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and others. Initially, this effort may simply lead to better burden-sharing in the blunt layer. Still, in the long-term, it will enable U.S. allies and partners to work together to address mutual security concerns with reduced U.S. involvement. The latter end state is especially desirable since it refutes any claims of U.S. unilateralism or use of proxies to combat China since the challenge would come from a network of like-minded nations.²³

Addressing the Taiwan Situation

Some might argue that a “contact-heavy” approach would not be an effective strategy when applied to Taiwan’s current situation, which arguably represents the greatest deterrence challenge to the U.S. today. Given the current U.S. defense posture in the Indo-Pacific, China’s extensive A2/AD umbrella, and Taiwan’s defensive capability, the U.S. has few options for presenting credible deterrence by denial towards a Chinese fait accompli. How would a “contact-heavy” approach to this problem fare? The first principle of this approach seems to run contrary to the NDS directive to “posture ready, combat-credible forces forward – alongside allies and partners – and, if necessary, to fight and win.”²⁴ The second principle of reinforcing the contact layer would do almost nothing to stop China if it launched a full-scale invasion of Taiwan. In terms of the third principle, which would seek to increase Taiwan’s A2/AD capability, every U.S. arms sale to Taiwan seems to provoke an angry diplomatic and military

response from China.²⁵ A “contact-heavy” approach does not appear at first glance to provide much in the way of deterrence by denial.

Nonetheless, a “contact-heavy” approach is the best option when faced with Taiwan’s precarious situation because it acknowledges the existence of non-military forms of deterrence and avoids several dangerous opportunities for escalation. First, a “contact-heavy” approach would require an extensive diplomatic, economic, and informational effort to deter China. Considering China’s recent loss of international standing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and largely unfinished Belt and Road Initiative, China remains vulnerable to international pressure in the near-term.²⁶ Second, although forward-based, combat-credible forces will eventually be necessary to maintain effective deterrence by denial, the use of existing systems in the short-term carries an enormous operational cost and risk of escalation. China would likely only consider additional U.S. forces in the region to be extremely provocative. Faced with what it might view as a closing window of opportunity, China might then attempt reunification by force. In the worst-case scenario, if China were to destroy any of these exquisite systems in a sudden attack, the loss would almost certainly draw the U.S. into a broader conflict. In this situation, more is not necessarily better than less. Finally, while U.S. arms sales to Taiwan certainly have a chilling effect on U.S.-China relations, the benefit of Taiwan’s increased defensive capability, which gives the U.S. an increased number of options in response to a Chinese fait accompli, outweighs the cost. The key will be gradual, well-timed sales of systems that fit well into the blunt layer construct.

Conclusion

Facing a dynamic and complex security environment within the Indo-Pacific, one in which miscalculation can lead to the damaging loss of credibility on one hand or devastating war

on the other, the U.S. is at a crossroads. Although the DoD has made an essential shift in its strategy, a proper implementation, particularly over the next several years, will make or break its success. Jeannie Johnson wisely identifies that the unsinkable optimism and bias for action that permeate American military culture lead to a tendency to “do it ourselves” and “attempt the impossible.”²⁷ The U.S. must avoid these biases that tempt it to return to its outdated conventional power projection methods. This is not to say that the U.S. should leave its Pacific-based aircraft carriers in homeport until the start of a conflict or abandon its efforts to develop a strong, effective blunt layer. However, the U.S. does need to carefully consider the suitability of its existing forces to fill the blunt layer in the short term and the ramifications of hastily filling the gap.

To that end, the DoD must not rush to pack the blunt layer with poorly-suited systems. The result will be exhaustion and escalation. Instead, over the next several months and years the DoD must patiently and deliberately shape its force posture in the Indo-Pacific to develop a blunt layer primarily composed of allied and partner forces and, in the interim, prioritize the deployment of capabilities optimized for the contact layer. In the short-term, a heavy contact layer will adequately mitigate the existing blunt layer shortfall and pave the way for an effective, multilateral deterrence by denial. Not only does this approach enable long-term success by capitalizing on existing U.S. asymmetric advantages, but it does so in a way that minimizes the risk of escalation and fosters a more robust, independent network of nations in the Indo-Pacific. To be fair, this approach has some nuance and is not without some risk. However, in light of the current global geopolitical climate, these risks are acceptable and outweigh the risks presented by the alternative. Only by adopting an approach with these qualities will the U.S. preserve its interests in the region and successfully navigate the strategic labyrinth ahead.

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