



Deterring China by Denial

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14. ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that the United States pursue a deterrence by denial strategy to persuade Beijing that it cannot achieve its revisionist objectives through aggression and coercion. Drawing inspiration from the theory of Archipelagic Defense and China's own Anti-Access Area Denial strategies, the paper explores the Chinese concept of deterrence and proposes military and economic objectives to influence China's rise is integrated into the international rule-based order.

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The Chinese have deftly taken advantage of the engagement and cooperation of democratic societies and the U.S.-led world order to pursue a comprehensive, zero-sum strategy in which no form of competition or conflict is off limits, and yet no individual action is likely to generate a response. Enacting the advice of former Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping, China has succeeded in “hiding their capabilities, and biding their time”¹ to the point they currently possess the military and economic clout to vie for dominance of the western Pacific.

The fact that the United States possesses sufficient nuclear strength to cause unacceptable damage to any adversary is beyond reproach.² However, in the current geopolitical environment in which an increasingly assertive China seeks to replace the U.S. as the world’s leading power by incremental exploitation and undermining of international norms, traditional Cold War era deterrence by punishment strategies are neither credible nor warranted. Chinese coercive actions across the whole of government are easily misconstrued as threats against separate nations, ideas, and organizations where the credibility and will of U.S. external deterrence is easily questioned. Viewed collectively, however, the Chinese pattern of behavior represents a direct challenge to primary U.S. interests from which our commitment must not be doubted.

Fortunately, turnabout is fair play in strategy,³ and the Chinese are not invulnerable to elements of their own practices. Specifically, an anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) strategy can be employed by the United States and allies to regain the initiative in the western Pacific and establish a *deterrence by denial* posture to convince Beijing that it cannot achieve its revisionist

¹ Friedberg, A. L. (2020, September/October). An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing. Foreign Affairs. Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1126380>

² Erickson, A. S. (2013, December 16). Deterrence by Denial: How to Prevent China From Using Force. The National Interest. Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/war-china-two-can-play-the-area-denial-game-9564>

³ Yoshihara, T., & Holmes, J. R. (2018). Red Star Rising over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy (Second ed.). Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, pp. 303

objectives through aggression and coercion. U.S. INDOPACOM should lead a multi-national effort to implement an active Archipelagic Defense⁴ strategy in key areas of the first island chain as part of a wide-spectrum, whole-of-government approach to protect, reenforce, and renew keystone institutions and norms throughout the world.

Military Deterrence by Denial – Archipelagic Defense

Gazing outward from Beijing, Chinese strategists see the first island chain as a geographical barricade “obstructing their access to the ocean”⁵. Securing unencumbered passage through this maritime barrier is integral to Chinese economic, diplomatic, and military goals; and therefore the United States should develop an air and sea denial capability designed to reinforce first island chain nations to prevent China’s ability to breakthrough and mount effective offensive operations.

The island chain consists of hundreds of land features where even the most expansive gaps fall within the range rings of relatively simple and inexpensive weapons systems, creating an opportunity to leverage U.S., allied, and partner ground forces in an otherwise Navy-dominated theater. The strategy of Archipelagic Defense – coined by American strategist Andrew Krepinevich – and its series of A2/AD-inspired detachments, consisting of small, highly mobile, expeditionary ground forces equipped with vehicle-launched surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles presents several opportunities to thwart and deter Chinese objectives through deterrence by denial. Within the Archipelagic Defense construct, combined ground forces are employed to complement and enhance finite U.S. air and naval forces, freeing them to conduct specialized

⁴ Krepinevich, A. F. (2015, March/April). How to Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense. Foreign Affairs. Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-02-16/how-deter-china>

⁵ Yoshihara, T., & Holmes, J. R. Red Star Rising over the Pacific, pp. 79

missions and to serve as a mobile reserve capable of rapidly concentrating force to “defend a threatened link in the chain.”⁶

Within the vast western Pacific and its countless islands, there are three primary geographic objectives that form the foundation of an archipelagic deterrence by denial strategy. First, at the southern extremity of the first island chain is the Strait of Malacca, the world’s busiest maritime chokepoint, less than two miles across at its narrowest point, and through which as much as 80% of China’s petroleum energy supplies pass.⁷ Control of this strategic chokepoint, or at least the ability to deny its access to the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) provides a potent lever for either deterring or escalating tensions in the South China Sea. Secondly, shoring up disputed islands in the East and South China Seas which have yet to be occupied by China and fall squarely within a regional country’s internationally recognized territorial claim such as the Japanese Senkakus, Taiwan’s Pratas, Philippine islands in the Luzon Strait, and Indonesia’s Natuna islands are opportunities to preempt Chinese expansion and build a common coalition with South East Asian nations while laying claim astride key chokepoints and sea lines of communication. And finally, while by far the most geopolitically sensitive element of the first island chain, Taiwan represents key terrain to a successful Archipelagic Defense strategy. During World War II, Admiral King described Taiwan as “the cork in the bottle of the South China Sea.”⁸ Today, democratic Taiwan is not only a symbolic stick in the eye of the Chinese Communist Party’s aspirations for rejuvenation and reunification, but also serves as a geographically strategic waypoint permitting access to the open ocean and southern lines of

⁶ Krepinevich, A. F. How to Deter China

⁷ Hamzah, B. A. (2017, March 13). Alleviating China's Malacca Dilemma. Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://isdp.eu/alleviating-chinas-malacca-dilemma/>

⁸ Yoshihara, T., & Holmes, J. R. Red Star Rising over the Pacific, pp. 200

communication critical to defense of both Japan and Korea⁹. Additionally, Taiwan possesses advanced manufacturing technology that China covets to help accelerate its economic and military progress.¹⁰ Technology will likely underpin all aspects of future strategic competition between China and the United States, and the reliance of international advanced semi-conductor supply chains on Taiwan represents a strategically significant critical vulnerability.

The U.S. military has already taken strides to align forces with a deterrence by denial strategy, most notably exemplified by the recent announcement by Secretary of the Navy Braithwaite that the Navy would establish a new U.S. First Fleet, “perhaps out of Singapore... in the crossroads between the Indian and Pacific oceans...[where] it can provide a much more *formidable deterrence*.” The formation of a new fleet centered on the Strait of Malacca sends a clear message to China and will likely be met with considerable pushback from Beijing. By reemphasizing the Chinese “Malacca Dilemma”, First Fleet will not only counterbalance China’s westward expansion, but also impose costs and potentially encourage overextension as China will need to establish alternative reliable energy pathways and infrastructure through “some of the least stable and productive regions of the world.”¹¹

Additionally, U.S. Marine Corps Commandant General Berger’s *Force Design 2020* document calls for substantial cuts and reprioritization to align the force with the National Defense Strategy to “support a naval strategy in the Pacific that is focused around China.”¹² A significant element of the restructuring will be a reinterpretation of the service’s Pacific island-hopping roots with a new Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) concept in which

⁹ Yoshihara, T., & Holmes, J. R. *Red Star Rising over the Pacific*, pp. 296

¹⁰ Friedberg, A. L. *An Answer to Aggression*

¹¹ Yoshihara, T., & Holmes, J. R. *Red Star Rising over the Pacific*, pp. 303

¹² Forsling, C. (2020, December 02). *Why The Marine Corps Is Changing To Be Ready For Future Fights With China*. Retrieved December 05, 2020, from <https://taskandpurpose.com/analysis/marine-corps-force-design-changes/>

Marines will seize “islands in the Pacific to serve as bases from which to strike the enemy.”¹³

This concept turns the World War II relationship between Marines and Navy forces on its head – deploying mobile, self-sustaining ground forces to compliment naval maneuver, rather than anchoring naval forces in support of prolonged ground invasions. Such a paradigm shift will serve to enable effective dynamic force employment and distributed maritime operations within the increasingly intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)-saturated first and second island chains.

Lastly, in mid-November 2020 a U.S. destroyer conducted the first-ever interception of an inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a Standard Missile 3 Block IIA (SM-3 IIA), representing a game-changing counter to adversary conventional and nuclear strike capabilities. The capability is a welcome buck to the ongoing trend of one-sided Chinese missile dominance in the theater and is particularly significant as a potential threat to the Chinese PLA’s premier A2/AD “Assassin’s Mace” weapons – the DF-21 and DF-26 “carrier killer” anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM). The technological demonstration’s deterrence message is made even more poignant by the joint development of the system between the U.S. and first island chain ally, Japan.

Most importantly, American “skin in the game” deployed alongside multiple Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other foreign partners expresses the U.S.’s long-term commitment to the INDOPACOM theater. Properly executed, an Archipelagic Defense strategy will give pause to Chinese decision makers to the risks and costs of their actions, slow momentum towards conflict, reassure regional allies, and – should deterrence fail – impose

¹³ Forsling, C. Why The Marine Corps Is Changing To Be Ready For Future Fights With China.

operational costs and buy time for reinforcements to arrive in theater.¹⁴ In the face of a determined Chinese offensive, these forces would likely represent the equivalent of a modern day Fulda Gap “speed bump”; however, the mere presence of such tripwires emplaced across the Chinese periphery will convey to Beijing and neighboring states that China’s illegitimate expansion will no longer be met with negligible resistance.

Response to Chinese “Conceptual Envelopment “

In his recent book, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, renown Western military strategist David Kilcullen describes the Chinese modern approach to warfare as “conceptual envelopment” through “horizontal maneuver” in which war is expanded beyond the use of force, to include military, trans-military, and non-military spheres encompassing everything from nuclear war down to seemingly benign issues like natural resources and pharmaceuticals as theaters of conflict.¹⁵ By broadening the spectrum of conflict beyond the bandwidth and capacity of the United States and its allies to recognize, let alone address,¹⁶ China’s envelopment strategy has managed to expand influence and attempt to “reshape international norms in line with its own illiberal, authoritarian preferences.”¹⁷ While the breakneck speed of Chinese military, particularly naval, modernization over the past two decades has preoccupied many Western defense analysts with flashbacks of Germany’s shipbuilding efforts in the leadup to World War I, in many ways, China’s military rise has also served to distract from their efforts to undermine the U.S.-led international order that has underwritten the peace and stability of the last seventy years.

¹⁴ Yoshihara, T., & Holmes, J. R. *Red Star Rising over the Pacific*, pp. 304-305

¹⁵ Kilcullen, D. (2020). *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 241

¹⁶ Kilcullen, D. *The Dragons and the Snakes*, pp. 244

¹⁷ Friedberg, A. L. *An Answer to Aggression*

Once again, the appropriate U.S. response should be primarily defensive, designed to deny the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) objectives and convince them of the futility of their revisionist strategy by bolstering the foundational international norms that China seeks to erode.

On the economic front, Beijing's problematic practices of rampant intellectual property theft, government subsidies of state owned enterprises (SOEs), restricted access to Chinese markets, and "civil-military fusion" mean that it can no longer be naively treated as a good faith trading or intellectual research partner.¹⁸ Western openness and cooperative policies have given China an unfair advantage and have only served to transfer wealth and influence at their own expense. The U.S. should also highlight the predatory lending practices associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and simultaneously hold Beijing accountable for its transgressions and investments while ensuring that international institutions and non-government organizations are able to supply relief to the citizens of distressed and victimized countries.

In the informational and technological realms, the U.S. and its allies must restrict the role of Chinese companies in supplying next generation information technology (IT) infrastructure and collecting citizen's personal information.¹⁹ And yet, the West should not simply block the spread of Chinese technology, they must offer a competitive and viable alternative – something the U.S. has utterly failed to do on the topic of Fifth Generation (5G) mobile infrastructure. The international proliferation of Chinese-developed authoritarian-enabling domestic surveillance "Smart City" technologies should also be curtailed and countered by supplying inexpensive and accessible work arounds that enable free speech such as end-to-end encrypted messaging apps and satellite internet connectivity. The impending emergence of worldwide satellite internet

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Friedberg, A. L. An Answer to Aggression

providers such as SpaceX's Starlink and Amazon's Kuiper, present intriguing opportunities to counter Chinese censorship and information operations by circumventing the Chinese "Great Firewall"²⁰ to provide a platform and amplify the voices of political dissidents and human rights violation victims within China. Finally, we should also recognize the large investments China has made in new technologies and sectors like quantum computing, green energy, 5G, hypersonic weaponry, and machine learning/artificial intelligence. Many of these technologies have the potential to be disruptive and will likely have a steep "first mover" bias that puts their developers at a notable advantage.

Conclusion.

The Chinese term most closely translated to the Western concept of deterrence is *weishe* 威慑²¹. Authoritative Chinese military sources including the Chinese PLA textbook *The Science of Military Strategy* note that *weishe* serves two distinct roles – "to dissuade the opponent from doing something" and to "*persuade the opponent what ought to be done.*" Thus, the Chinese conception of deterrence differs subtly, yet significantly from Western theory in that it embodies both deterrence as well as *compellence*. Furthermore, in the Chinese view, "strategic deterrence, involves all the components of "comprehensive national power." These include military forces, economic power, diplomatic influence, scientific and technological capabilities, and even political and cultural unity."²²

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Cheng, D. (1st quarter 2011). Chinese Views on Deterrence. Joint Force Quarterly, (60), 92-94. Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jfq/jfq-60.pdf>

²² Cheng, D. Chinese Views on Deterrence.

Deterrence ultimately resides in the mind of adversary decision makers, and once again, China is not immune and may even be particularly responsive to elements of deterrence with Chinese characteristics. For any successful deterrence strategy, effectiveness relies on the ability to communicate and an underlying element of trust. In pursuing a comprehensive deterrence by denial strategy, our goal should not and cannot be simply to restrict the rise of China by any means necessary, but must be tied to specific and measurable objectives *designed to influence and reform their behavior over the long term* – a concept with which they are intimately familiar. It would be unwise to put China on “death ground” and stoke the fires of nationalism and historical injustices that can quickly lead to escalation and violence. While dissuading aggression, our actions must also encourage and demonstrate the viability of constructive behavior within the international system and even be open to accommodating the rise of China by modernizing some institutions through deliberate and legitimate processes. We must also use discretion to conserve bandwidth and be willing to accept some undesirable Chinese behavior when it does not threaten our primary national interests.