



CSBA

Center for Strategic and
Budgetary Assessments

Reinforcing the Front Line: U.S. Defense Strategy and the Rise of China

- Introduction
- Strategy in A Changing Security Environment
- Putting China's Military Rise in Perspective
- In Defense of Forward Defense
- Conclusion

- Competition for attention with NATO/Middle East
- East Asia will be highest priority over the long run
 - World's largest economies
 - Vital sea lanes
- China has moved from manpower-intensive continental power to more sophisticated “composite” power oriented towards maritime domain
- U.S. can no longer able to project air and sea power with impunity to protect allies/vital sea lanes
- Can we avoid the “Thucydides trap?”
- Backdrop of increased tensions related to territorial disputes in “near seas.”
- U.S. “rebalance” and tightening of alliance ties
 - Philippines

- Global leadership/engagement vs. retrenchment
- U.S. grand strategy since 1945:
 - Prevent hostile actors from dominating Eurasian rimland
 - Provide U.S. security umbrella to allies
 - Provide global public goods i.e. control of the commons.
- Still bipartisan consensus to the proposition that: “There is no safe defensive position on this side of the oceans”?
- Reliance on:
 - Continuous global presence
 - Forward defense
 - Nuclear deterrence
- Post Cold War, this continued to make sense in the absence of any global peer competitor
- Today return of great power competition
- Forward defense much harder to implement.
 - Emergence of revisionist threats in three theaters
 - Diffusion of technology and erosion of U.S. qualitative edge
- Hard to set priorities but Asia ranks at top in importance
 - China’s emergence as a great power and its military modernization

- China's reorientation from continental power to one oriented on "seas, skies, heavens, and cyberspace"
- Changes in doctrine, war fighting concepts, force structure
- Dimensions of China's coercive power
- Competition between power projection and A2/AD
- Threaten U.S. large theater bases, combat and combat support assets as well as information networks
- Conventional forces main concern
 - U.S. maintains nuclear superiority (for now)
 - U.S. still dominant globally
 - Much of the challenge is "gray zone" conflict" or "creeping expansion"

CSBA China's Military Rise in Perspective

- China developing ability to launch coordinated strike against military targets within and perhaps beyond first island chain
- Large, capable and diverse missile force plus modernizing air force could launch a “joint anti-air raid campaign” to degrade U.S. combat air power and prevent U.S. from aiding allies
- Would be challenging for PLA but U.S. has relatively small number of bases and our active defenses could be exhausted by saturation attacks
- China targeting U.S. information based vulnerabilities
 - ASAT, Cyber, EW
 - Aim is to undermine will to resist and degrade ability to retaliate but as China's military becomes more sophisticated it will face many similar vulnerabilities

CSBA China's Military Rise in Perspective

- China's maritime capabilities
 - Initial emphasis on asymmetric sea denial capabilities
ASCMs, ASBMs
 - Now accelerating development of traditional surface and undersea warfare capabilities
 - Adding surface combatants for both littoral warfare as well as near and far seas; aircraft carrier
 - Submarine fleet composed of growing number of diesel-electric ships that are both well armed and hard to detect and developing nuclear attack and cruise missile variants
 - PLAN still lacks proficiency in anti-submarine warfare, joint operations, limitations on diesel-electric subs.
- **BOTTOM LINE** – A2/AD remains the main U.S. military challenge presented by China's rise.

- Forward defense has underpinned stability by clearly and credibly signaling U.S. will oppose domination by an adversary and aid its allies
- U.S. will need to adapt forward defense to manage the new operational challenges
- 3 Options: **denial, punishment, rollback**
 - **Denial** would stop adversary from forcibly achieving objectives – trade space for time in a protracted campaign and attrite enemy’s combat power
 - **Punishment** would prioritize retaliation in aftermath of adversary action. Impose costs to reverse aggression through direct attacks on territory, peripheral campaigns to deny valuable assets, or blockade to undermine economy
 - **Rollback** would rely more on brute force to directly reverse an adversary’s gains. Acting with allies to retake lost territory and degrade enemy military power so it no longer represents a threat
- Not mutually exclusive options. U.S. might find itself combining elements of all three
- Denial is currently U.S. default option
- Punishment – distant blockade is generally regarded as chief option. China’s dependence on exports and resource limitations give it intuitive appeal. Would allow U.S. to leverage its command of global commons. Also might allow U.S. to avoid escalating conflict by obviating need to strike targets on the mainland
- Rollback really is a throwback to mobilization strategy of World War II. Would logically tied to U.S. retrenchment or adoption of an “off-shore balancing approach

CSBA Assessing Denial, Punishment, Rollback

- Denial does not prevent use of punishment or rollback later. Resorting to punishment/rollback would restrict denial
- Not contesting aggression ab initio could harm U.S. interest – could prompt adversary to try and execute fait accompli and could cost U.S. peacetime support of allies
- Maritime blockade would have to overcome number of operational challenges. Also not clear that the PRC would see blockade as non-escalatory
- Rollback would be daunting for allies who would have to try and hold adversary until U.S. could mobilize, would require U.S. to reconstitute lost military capability down the road and would ultimately require many of the same capabilities necessary for forward defense

CSBA Assessing Denial, Punishment, Rollback

- Adapting forward defense to manage rise of China
 - Geography will have impact on amount of combat power both sides can bring to bear especially at the outset
 - U.S. combat power assets becoming increasingly vulnerable
 - Fighter bases and carriers are small in number, easy to locate, hard to defend
 - Long-range strike platforms not survivable in contested environments
 - Submarines have shallow magazines and not easy to reload in contested environments
- China working to exploit these vulnerabilities
- Asymmetries could be particularly acute at out set of crisis

- Steps U.S. can take:
 - Rebalance air capabilities to emphasize long-range strike platforms and expand undersea strike activity
 - But note war-fighting presence paradox:
 - Capabilities most useful in contested environments may not provide as much visible assurance for allies
 - Capabilities that traditionally contribute to assurance by visibly symbolizing U.S presence actually may be most vulnerable in actual conflict
- How can U.S. both deter and assure at the same time?
 - Possible answer – better integrate land power into forward defense strategy
 - U.S. could emulate China and field mobile, land-based missiles of its own
 - For example, U.S. land based ASCMs would enhance U.S. capacity for sea denial, could provide both deterrence and assurance