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The Real Challenge in the Pacific

A Response to “How to ^L_{SEP}Deter China”

By Michael D. Swaine



In past years, Andrew Krepinevich, Jr., has argued for a U.S. military operational concept in the Pacific theater called “Air-Sea Battle.” This concept relies heavily on preemptive deep strikes in the early stages of a conflict and would have been highly escalatory. Perhaps implicitly recognizing the costs and risks of such an approach, Krepinevich now offers up a replacement he calls “Archipelagic Defense” (“[How to Deter China](#),” March/April 2015). This approach would “deny China the ability to control the air and the sea around the first island chain,” largely through the deployment of U.S. and allied ground forces and supporting military assets, including anti-aircraft, antimissile, and

antisubmarine capabilities. Arrayed in areas from Japan to the Philippines, these measures are necessary, he argues, because Beijing is committed to a strategy of coercion and intimidation designed to exclude the United States from the western Pacific and eventually lead to China's dominating the region.

Krepinevich is correct that some sort of denial strategy directed against Chinese provocations and attacks on vital allied territory in the first island chain makes sense as a deterrent against worst-case contingencies. He is unclear, however, about how this strategy should relate to the overall U.S. security posture in the region. And he fails to address the truly critical strategic issue confronting Washington, which is the near-inexorable relative decline of U.S. military and economic predominance along the Asian littoral.

For analysts such as Krepinevich, it is axiomatic that rising powers such as China seek hard power dominance and that the central challenge for currently dominant powers such as the United States is how to prevent them from doing so. This sort of zero-sum thinking—which is increasingly common on both sides of the Pacific—polarizes the region and undermines the goals of continued peace and prosperity toward which all strive. Both sides would benefit from a different approach, one that moved from a growing contest over U.S. predominance in the region to a genuine, long-term balance of power in the western Pacific resting on mutual military and political restraint and accommodation, as well as new policy initiatives designed to reduce the volatility of flash points such as the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan.

CLASHING ASSUMPTIONS

Virtually all U.S. officials and many Asian leaders believe that American military predominance in the maritime realm has provided the foundation for a 70-year period of relative peace and prosperity throughout most of the Asia-Pacific region, forestalling arms races and militarized disputes and permitting a sustained focus on peaceful economic development. Many Chinese, however, believe that in an increasingly multipolar and interdependent world, order and prosperity should rely on a roughly equal balance of power, both globally and among the region's major nations, which should cooperate in managing common challenges, working whenever possible through international institutions such as the United Nations.

To some extent, these views are self-serving. Washington benefits enormously from a U.S.-led international order in which its views and preferences are given special consideration, and Beijing would benefit from a more equal balance of power, which would give it a greater voice and check the United States. But elites in each country also genuinely think that their position accurately reflects the current and future reality of the international system. Americans generally believe that peace and stability flourish under American hegemony, which can and should be preserved, and their Chinese counterparts generally believe that such hegemony is an unfortunate historical anomaly that should give way to a more balanced distribution of power—and that it is doing so already.



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For most of the postwar era, these perspectives coexisted relatively easily, primarily because Beijing was too weak to push its own view and was able to rise steadily within the U.S.-sponsored order. But times have changed; China has outgrown its subordinate status and now feels strong enough to press its case in the western Pacific.

This development should not be surprising to anyone who understands modern Chinese history and great-power transitions. Beijing has an ongoing incentive to work with Washington and the West to sustain continued economic growth and to address a growing array of common global and regional concerns, from pandemics to climate change to terrorism. At the same time, it understandably wishes to reduce its vulnerability to potential future threats from the United States and other nations while increasing its overall influence along its strategically important maritime periphery. As its overseas power and influence grow, its foreign interests expand, and its domestic nationalist backers become more assertive, Beijing will naturally become less willing to accept unconditionally military, political, and economic relationships and structures that it believes disproportionately and unjustly favor Western powers. And it will increasingly worry that Washington might resort to pressure or force to try to undermine Chinese security moves in the western Pacific and head off the United States' impending relative decline.

Many Chinese observers now believe that Beijing's past weakness and its need to cooperate with the United States and the West in general have made it too accommodating or passive in dealing with

perceived challenges [SEP] to China's vital national interests, from U.S. support for Taiwan and Asian disputants over maritime claims to close-up U.S. surveillance and other intelligence-gathering activities along the Chinese coast. The more extreme variants of this nationalist viewpoint threaten to transform China's long-standing "peaceful development" policy, which focuses on the maintenance of amicable relations with the United States and other powers, into a more hard-edged approach aimed at more actively undermining U.S. influence in Asia. The so-called bottom-line concept of Chinese President Xi Jinping's foreign policy is an apparent step in this direction, stressing in an unprecedented manner the need for China to stand resolute in managing territorial and sovereignty issues in the East China and South China Seas.



Observing these stirrings, meanwhile, many American and other foreign observers see the beginnings of a larger effort to eject the United States from Asia and eventually replace it as the regional, and possibly even global, superpower. China's greater assertiveness regarding maritime territorial disputes and U.S. and Japanese intelligence and surveillance activities along its coastline are interpreted as tests of U.S. and allied resolve, a prelude to the creation of no-go zones essential for the establishment of Chinese control over the western Pacific. In this view, the proper course of action for Washington is to decisively disabuse Beijing of its aspirations by enhancing U.S. predominance, increasing Chinese vulnerability in the western Pacific, and making clear who is boss, right up to China's 12-nautical-mile territorial waters.

The problem with this outlook—implicit in the concept of Archipelagic Defense that Krepinevich proposes—is that it misdiagnoses China's motivations and thus exacerbates, rather than mitigates, the underlying problem. Beijing's de facto attempts to limit or end U.S. predominance along its maritime periphery are motivated by uncertainty, insecurity, and opportunism rather than a grand strategic vision of Chinese predominance. Chinese leaders today are not trying to carve out an exclusionary sphere of influence, especially in hard-power terms; they are trying to reduce their considerable vulnerability and increase their political, diplomatic, and economic leverage in their own backyard. This is a much less ambitious and in many ways more understandable goal for a continental great power. It does not necessarily threaten vital U.S. or allied interests, and it can and should be met with understanding rather than defensive aggressiveness.

UNSUSTAINABLE TRENDS

Continued U.S. predominance in the western Pacific cannot be justified by the need to resist a Chinese drive to replace it, nor is it necessary in order to ensure regional (and global) order. It is inconceivable that Beijing will accept U.S. predominance in perpetuity and that it will grant the United States complete freedom of action in the Pacific and recognize its ability to prevail militarily in a potential conflict. Trying to sustain such predominance, therefore, is actually the quickest route to instability, practically guaranteeing an arms race, increased regional polarization, and reduced cooperation between Washington and Beijing on common global challenges. And even if some Chinese leaders were tempted to accept continued U.S. predominance, they would almost certainly end up meeting fierce and sustained domestic criticism for doing so as China's power grows and would likely end ^[L]_[SEP]up reversing course to ensure their political survival.

Trying to sustain American military predominance in the region, meanwhile, will become increasingly difficult and expensive. A recent study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (which I co-authored) on the long-term security environment in Asia concluded that the United States will remain the strongest military power on a global level for many years to come. But this study also found that Washington will almost certainly confront increasingly severe economically induced limitations on its defense spending that will constrain its efforts to keep well ahead of a growing Chinese military and paramilitary presence within approximately 1,500 nautical miles of the Chinese coastline (that is, the area covered by the so-called first and second island chains).

The barriers to maritime predominance, however, apply to China as well as the United States. The Carnegie Endowment study also concluded that U.S. military power in Asia will almost certainly remain very strong and that even increased Chinese regional military capabilities will not offer Beijing unambiguous superiority. Any Chinese attempt to establish predominance in Asia would fail, therefore, both because it would be difficult for China to surpass the United States and because a scenario of this kind would frighten bystanders and drive them into Washington's arms.

Chinese leaders understand this and so are highly unlikely to seek predominance if they feel that they can achieve a decent amount of security in less confrontational ways. They are likely to seek some form of predominance (as opposed to acting merely opportunistically and in a more limited manner) only if Washington's words and actions convince them that even the minimal level of security they seek requires it. Unfortunately, the United States' adoption of aggressive military concepts—such as Air-Sea Battle, Offshore Control, or even Archipelagic Defense—would deny them such security and thus contribute to an ever-worsening security dilemma.

THE NEED FOR MORE STABILITY

For both the United States and China, therefore, the primary future strategic challenge is finding a way to develop a mutually beneficial means of transitioning from U.S. predominance toward a stable, more equitable balance of power in the western Pacific—one in which neither nation has the clear capacity to prevail in an armed conflict, but in which both countries believe that their vital interests can nonetheless remain secure.

This will be difficult to achieve and potentially dangerous. It will not only require a variety of crisis-management and confidence-building mechanisms, beyond what have been developed thus far in Asia, but also necessitate high levels of strategic reassurance and restraint. Many knowledgeable observers have offered recommendations designed to reduce mistrust and enhance cooperation between Washington and Beijing, involving everything from caps on U.S. and Chinese defense spending to mutual, limited concessions on Taiwan and the ongoing maritime disputes. Many of these initiatives make sense. But they fail to address the real underlying problem—namely, China's unwillingness to continue to accept a clearly subordinate military position along its maritime periphery.

To reduce the risk of conflict and enhance the opportunities for cooperation, Washington and Beijing will need to reach reliable understandings regarding the future long-term status of the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan, the management of maritime territorial disputes in the East China and South China Seas, and the scope and function of non-Chinese military activities within the first island chain (or at least within both China's and Japan's exclusive economic zones). Such understandings should almost certainly involve some credible form of neutralization of these areas as sources of growing contention or as locations from which to project U.S. or Chinese power, creating a de facto buffer zone along China's maritime periphery. Only these kinds of moves will provide the mutual strategic assurance required to maintain a stable security environment over the long term.

In the case of North and South Korea, this strategy would imply the emergence of a unified, nonaligned (or only loosely aligned) peninsula free from foreign military forces. Such an outcome would need to rest on credible security assurances by both the United States and China that a unified Korea would remain free from coercion and always open to close economic and political relations with both countries. Such assurances might involve the continuation in some form of a security relationship with Washington, although one that is greatly reduced, at least in the short to medium term. This process might also require Japan to provide security assurances to a unified Korea, at least to the extent of not acquiring nuclear weapons or some types of conventional weapons that the latter might find threatening, such as precision ballistic and cruise missile strike capabilities.

In the case of Taiwan, it would require, as a first step, a U.S.-Chinese understanding regarding restrictions on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, along with verifiable limits on relevant Chinese military production and deployments, including of ballistic missiles and strike aircraft. Beijing would also likely need to provide credible assurances that it would not use force against Taiwan in any contingency short of an outright Taiwanese declaration of de jure independence or the U.S. placement of forces on the island.

In the past, Beijing has resisted providing assurances regarding any nonuse of force toward the island, viewing guarantees of this kind as a limit on Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. However, similar to the case of the Korean Peninsula, Beijing would likely view such a shift in its stance toward Taiwan as acceptable if it were necessary to stabilize the western Pacific; Chinese leaders might also regard it as

a step toward the eventual unification of the island with the mainland. In addition, Beijing would likely need to accept that such unification could occur only through a peaceful process involving the willing consent of the people of Taiwan and that it might take decades. Washington, for its part, would likely need to provide assurances to Beijing that it would neither place forces on the island nor provide any new level of defense assistance to Taipei, as long as Beijing abided by its own assurances. And both countries would need to consult closely with both Taiwan and Japan at each step of this process and provide clear and credible assurances regarding the understanding reached between them.

Regarding territorial disputes in the East China and South China Seas, the United States needs to make clear that it has little direct interest in the interactions occurring among the disputants, apart from clear security threats leveled against the two U.S. allies involved, Japan and the Philippines. Washington should support, in an evenhanded manner, a binding code of conduct and established legal procedures for resolving clashes and arbitrating claims, but it should avoid staking its credibility on ensuring that a noncoercive process is followed in every instance. That said, the United States should also make clear that it will oppose, with force if necessary, any Chinese attempt to establish an exclusion zone or a de facto expansion of China's territorial waters in disputed areas beyond legally justifiable limits. For its part, Beijing must clearly affirm, through its words and actions, that there is no military solution to these disputes and that it will never seek to dislodge rivals forcibly from occupied areas. It must also credibly and convincingly state—privately, if not publicly—that South China Sea waters located within its so-called nine-dash line (a border it claimed in the 1940s and that no other country has recognized) but outside its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone constitute open ocean.

In the conventional military realm, U.S. primacy within at least the first island chain will need to be replaced by a genuinely balanced force posture and an accompanying military doctrine. This approach should likely be centered on what is termed a “mutual denial” operational concept, in which both parties—China and the United States and its allies—possess sufficient levels of anti-access/area-denial capabilities to deter each other's attempts to achieve a sustained advantage through military means over potentially volatile areas (such as Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, and disputed rocks and islands).

On the nuclear level, a stable balance of power in the western Pacific will require a clear set of mutual assurances designed to strengthen the deterrence capacity of each side's nuclear arsenal and thereby reduce the danger of escalation. To attain this goal, U.S. and allied defense analysts must discard the dangerous notion that Washington's primacy should extend to the nuclear realm. The United States should authoritatively indicate that it accepts and will not threaten China's retaliatory nuclear strike capability; abandon consideration of a long-range, precision global strike system or other systems capable of destroying China's nuclear arsenal; and provide greater assurances that its ballistic missile defense capabilities cannot eliminate a Chinese second strike. For its part, Beijing must be willing to accept such U.S. assurances and itself eschew any attempt to transition beyond its existing minimal deterrent, second-strike nuclear capability to a much larger force.

Obviously, these sorts of changes would have major implications for U.S. allies and friends in the region. For Japan to provide a unified Korea with the necessary assurances and to accept such adjustments in the United States' force posture and stance toward Taiwan, for example, certain clear understandings with Washington and Beijing would be necessary. In general, the creation of a de facto buffer zone or a neutral area within the first island chain would almost certainly require that Japan significantly strengthen its defense capabilities—either autonomously or, preferably, within the context of a more robust, yet still limited, U.S.-Japanese security alliance.

This strengthening would entail the creation of a more fully integrated U.S.-Japanese infrastructure critical for so-called C4ISR capabilities. (C4ISR stands for “command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.”) It would also necessitate building stronger passive defenses against possible Chinese ballistic and cruise missile threats to U.S. and Japanese military assets and enhancing Japanese logistics and support facilities, alongside improvements in specific defense-oriented Japanese capabilities, such as antisubmarine warfare and interceptor aircraft. However, these steps would not require Japan to become a fully normalized security partner of the United States or to undertake alliance-based security activities across the western Pacific and beyond.

For China, acceptance of a strengthened (albeit limited) U.S.-Japanese alliance; a unified, largely nonaligned Korean Peninsula; verifiable limits on Chinese capabilities vis-à-vis Taiwan; and the other elements of a stable balance of power would require a clear willingness to forgo those more ambitious objectives toward which some Chinese might aspire, both now and in the future. Those objectives include, most notably, the clear ability to establish control over the waters and airspace along China's maritime periphery and a Sinocentric Asian economic and political order that largely excludes the United States. This outcome will likely require, in turn, that Beijing make concerted, public efforts to reject and invalidate among the Chinese citizenry the more extreme interpretations of Chinese nationalism. The benefits for China of these accommodations would be an enhanced level of security via a reduced U.S. threat to vital Chinese interests and the avoidance of a costly and likely increasingly dangerous security competition.

OBSTACLES TO A STABLE BALANCE

Several obstacles stand in the way of Washington and Beijing undertaking such a substantial change in perceptions, practices, and deployments. On the U.S. side, the first and foremost barrier is the general refusal of most, if not all, U.S. decision-makers and officials to contemplate an alternative to U.S. military predominance in this vital region. In addition, the short-term perspective, natural inertia, and risk avoidance of bureaucrats and policy elites militate against major shifts in policy and approach, especially in the absence of an urgent and palpable need for change. Indeed, it is extremely difficult for any major power, much less a superpower, to begin a fundamental strategic shift in anticipation of diminished relative capabilities before that diminishment has fully revealed itself.

In the western Pacific in particular, as Krepinevich's article demonstrates, U.S. national security decision-makers remain wedded to the notion that U.S. power (and in particular U.S. naval power)

must brook no limitations in international waters. Service interests, intelligence needs, and alliance-maintenance requirements all reinforce the general U.S. bias in favor of continued maritime predominance.

U.S. decision-makers are also extremely loath to contemplate significant adjustments in the current status of the Korean Peninsula or Taiwan. It is generally believed that any movement toward a reduction in, or even a significant modification of, the U.S. security commitment to South Korea and Taiwan might result in their either moving to acquire nuclear arms or falling prey to threats or attacks from North Korea and China. Moreover, Japan might react to such a movement by questioning Washington's security commitment to Tokyo, which could result in a break in the two countries' alliance and even in Japan's acquisition of nuclear arms.

On the Chinese side, perhaps the most significant obstacle to undertaking a transition toward a stable balance of power in Asia derives from the insecurities and weaknesses of the Chinese government, both at home and abroad. China's leaders rely for their legitimacy and support not only on continued economic success and rising living standards but also on a form of nationalism that prizes the ability of the regime to stand up to slights and correct past injustices meted out by the imperialist powers during China's "century of humiliation." This dependence makes Chinese leaders hesitant to quell more extreme forms of nationalism and prone to concealing their country's military capabilities while they are undergoing rapid development.

A STAGED PROCESS IS REQUIRED

Clearly, therefore, Washington and Beijing are not about to agree on any sort of grand bargain to establish a new regional security environment anytime soon. Such a fundamental shift in policies and approaches could occur only gradually over an extended period of time. But even starting to lay its foundations would require that elites in Washington, Beijing, and other Asian capitals open their eyes to the dangers of continuing on the present course and the benefits of devising fundamentally new arrangements appropriate to inexorably changing power realities.

Such rethinking must take place in several stages: first domestically, then among allies, and finally through a bilateral U.S.-Chinese strategic dialogue, with ample opportunities for each side to assess the credibility and veracity of the other's commitments along the way. Once all the players recognize the big picture—the general need for strategic readjustment—they can address specific concessions and arrangements.

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An understanding that a gradual, peaceful transition to a more equal regional balance of power was under way could make Beijing more likely to persuade Pyongyang to abandon or strongly limit its nuclear weapons program and begin the sort of reforms that would eventually yield a unified peninsula. Both U.S. and Chinese leaders might ultimately convince Taipei of the benefits of new and more stable security arrangements (none of which would require the U.S. abandonment of Taiwan). And as for Japan, a calibrated strengthening of its capabilities, in the context of the creation of a buffer-like arrangement and stable balance of power with regard to the first island chain, would almost certainly prove acceptable to Beijing and eventually necessary for Tokyo.

Such realignments will not occur automatically. They will require courageous and farsighted leadership in all the relevant capitals, some significant risk taking, and highly effective diplomacy. In fact, given the daunting obstacles in the way, one might legitimately ask why it is worth even raising the prospect of these changes. The answer is that the alternative—trying to sustain U.S. predominance in the western Pacific and muddle through continual and likely intensifying crises—is even worse, risking the sort of large-scale military conflict that power transitions throughout history have so often generated.

Ultimately, the choice facing decision-makers in the United States, China, and other Asian powers is whether to deal forthrightly and sensibly with the changing regional power distribution or avoid the hard decisions that China's rise poses until the situation grows ever more polarized and dangerous. Indeed, delay will only make the process of change more difficult. There are no other workable alternatives. 🌐

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