

Avoiding Thucydides' Trap in the Western Pacific through the Air Domain

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Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States has arguably exercised the most powerful global military imbalance the world has ever seen. This domination; however, is perceived to be fading in the wake of a new possible contender. The tension and likelihood of conflict between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has risen in recent decades. The inevitability of conflict has taken root in many academic and strategic forums such as 92nd Street Y with Graham Allison and Gen David Petraeus (US Army, retired), The Belfer Center, the US Army War College, and many others. The term "Thucydides' Trap" has echoed in many discussions among leading strategic, military, intelligence, and political science analysts. This is the notion of one rising power seeking to take its place in the sun by replacing the perceived declining power, which has caused many to fear a new kind of war. Dr. Graham Allison identified 16 scenarios over the past 500 years in which two nations competed within the parameters of "Thucydides' Trap," and of those scenarios, 12 have resulted in war.¹ At a war likelihood of 75 percent, the odds do not seem to be in Washington's or Beijing's favor.

The Pivot

Under the Obama administration, the United States formulated the "Pivot" policy, but these strategic redeployments have not fully taken shape. This strategic shift out of Europe and into the Indo-Pacific have shown the strategic danger China has represented, and many would argue resulted in a swift buildup of Chinese military capability unlike ever before. From a reorganization of naval capability to a revolution in long-range munitions, Beijing has demonstrated China's national will and determination to compete at the American level. The United States must adapt to a new method of thinking in the air domain to counter the potential reach by China for its place in the sun. American scholars like Dr. John Mearsheimer recognize that the current status of American grand strategy and the current commitment to NATO will be impacted by the rise of China and the potential for great-power competition between the United States and the PRC for global influence. This pivot out of Europe by American forces and the redeployment of massive American assets into the Indo-Pacific have become neces-

sary to counter a rising China. According to Mearsheimer, “The U.S. is faced with a possible near peer competitor. And that power is in Asia and the United States will have to go to extraordinary lengths to contain it [China].”² This rise will force the United States to pivot out of Europe and into East Asia in a massive movement of troops and materiel to contain the PRC. The outcome of any future conflict between the United States and China will be determined not only by the men and women operating the newest weapons and information systems but also by each side’s ability to identify weaknesses to exploit on day one of the fight.

AirSea Battle and Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons

With the threat of a rising China reaching great-power rivalry status, it has become necessary to counter this rise through military planning in the undesired likelihood of hostilities. These plans require doctrine and assets to meet objectives and capabilities that are essential to any modern war plan. Analysts and experts in the theater have been highly critical of the AirSea Battle (ASB) doctrinal concept. The newly established Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) doctrine, formed out of the AirSea Battle concept, has recognized some of that criticism and attempted to redesign the concept to meet realistic antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) threats posed by the PRC in the Western Pacific and to reestablish sea control in the area. These concepts are flawed to a degree. The notion of retaining or regaining sea and air control in the Western Pacific is unrealistic against the current power we face there. This is not Iraq, Iran, or even Russia. China presents the United States and our partners in the region with a completely different situation.³ ASB doctrine harps upon the ability for the United States to project significant power across all domains into the Western Pacific against the PRC to counter the adversary’s various A2/AD threats. It seeks to gain decision and information superiority to bring assets to the battlefield first with the necessary mass to achieve tactical and operational success. ASB emphasizes “getting on the same net” and decreasing the amount of time it takes to bring information to the combatant commanders. Multi-domain integration into real-time intelligence, information, and integration sharing is fundamental to this battle doctrine. For example, the integration aspect can be illustrated through the ability to train a USAF F-22 or F-35 pilot to take control and direct a US Navy-launched Tomahawk cruise missile. While this needs to be a priority for “the pivot” strategy, the concept of an offensive and deep-fires capability is flawed.⁴ This is not 1984 Western Europe. We are not dealing with a Soviet-equipped mass of forces along a physical border of significance. AirLand Battle doctrine defined the ability for

thinkers like Gen Don Starry and Col John Boyd to integrate air and land power to achieve a conventional blocking strategy to defeat Soviet and Warsaw Pact conventional forces behind the first echelons of Eastern Bloc category A (front line units such as Guards Tank or Guards Motorized Divisions) and category B (second echelon, reserve tank and motorized divisions) units. ASB and the modified JAM-GC concepts attempt to do the same in relation to air and sea integration, while also utilizing all other domains to create a joint environment in which decision making and information is shared instantly across all units. In the case of an American and PRC confrontation in the Western Pacific, this concept is heavily focused on an offensive mind-set without a significantly concentrated force that possess the necessary numbers to compete with China.

The Thucydides' Trap is not a prophecy that an offensive strategy can avoid. A major confrontation and battle for air, cyber, and sea control between the United States and a rising China is a war unlike any our society has ever experienced. We are slowly growing into an era in which no power can exercise complete sea control and the risk involved in placing surface forces into proximity of A2/AD assets grows. It is commonly accepted that the United States can project power on a scale rarely experienced in world history; however, that should not be taken for granted. It does not matter how much combat power can be projected off the African coast, in the Mediterranean, in the Persian Gulf, or in Europe. What matters in this case is how much power the United States can project in the Western Pacific against an integrated and deep A2/AD environment. For a moment, imagine a formidable and seemingly hostile foreign naval presence in the Caribbean or off the East or West coast of the United States. In this case, the United States would be able to deny or threaten any significant enemy naval force attempting to exercise control over the air or sea in proximity to North America. The United States would consider any power attempting to exercise this control as a threat to our national security. This scenario mirrors China's perspective of developments in the Western Pacific. ASB, as originated, is reliant on American offensive and preemptive action to lessen the threat imposed against American naval assets by A2/AD platforms. This posture is inherently dangerous and raises the likelihood of confrontation without the necessary mass to dominate the battlespace. JAM-GC identifies this problem and attempts to lessen the amount of risk to our assets by focusing on defeating the enemy's plan and intent, rather than disrupting and destroying his capability.⁵ We must identify what our strategic objectives are and how we can achieve them through operational and tactical superiority. We must identify what victory looks like in this scenario of sea control and breaking access denial. The objective cannot openly be regime change in Beijing. An embrace of human rights and a shift in Beijing's thinking toward totali-

tarianism can be a focus; however, the PRC's nuclear umbrella clearly limits our options of influence. If regime change were the case, we have little capability to project power to prosecute a land campaign against the People's Liberation Army. So, to be realistic, an obtainable goal is to counterbalance the growth of the PRC and provide a strategy that places doubt and uncertainty in the minds of Chinese leadership about external expansion. The ASB concept seems to identify an operational concept without a strategic context. The JAM-GC is a great improvement, but I would propose we go further to increase the amount of risk on the PRC to aggressively pursue external objectives and to hinder their ability to capitalize on their geographical and timing initiative in the first island chain.

Lessons to Consider

History has shown that perceived military weakness can motivate an aggressor. This example can be seen in June 1967. The overwhelming Israeli success over the armed forces of the combined Arab armies during the Six-Day War was birthed through the ability of Israeli Air Force (IAF) to overcome its perceived weakness in numbers of aircraft and available pilots. The Arab world had received a staggering number of aircraft from the Soviet bloc, and the combined Arab armies were poised to attack Israel. The Israelis took advantage of a perceived overconfidence and launched a crippling first strike against the powerful air arm of the strongest air force in the Middle East, Egypt.⁶ Operation Focus had been rehearsed for years prior to the launch of the Six-Day War to provide the Israeli Defense Forces with the critical element of air supremacy for a lightning ground offensive into the Sinai.⁷ The IAF had trained their ground personnel in the essential art of maintaining a fast turnaround rate for launching sorties of aircraft. With its small air force, Israel was able to gain the element of surprise over the Egyptian air crews and destroyed all major air bases in Egypt at the same time. The Israelis had chosen to destroy the Arab aircraft on the ground just as the Egyptian combat air patrols (CAP) had landed and started breakfast. The fog of war descended heavily on Egyptian command and control. Their inability to adapt and organize after the crippling Israel strike on their air forces led to the Arab defeat on the ground.⁸

Learning from this example, the United States must maintain and continue its practice of integrated combat turns (IGT) and increase drills in the region to maintain a high state of readiness to produce the maximum number of sorties possible to respond to an offensive action in the Western Pacific.⁹ The numerical and geographical advantage of the PRC presents a problem to any commander attempting to exercise control over the air and sea domains in the Western Pacific and the ability for American ground crews to turn aircraft will be decisive.

We Have Seen This Before

This notion of a fast and effective surprise attack is not new to the United States. Americans are aware of the consequences that result from a highly effective conventional attack on strategic assets in the theater of operations. The fear of such a disastrous beginning to a conflict has weighed heavily on war planners since the end of World War II. At Pearl Harbor, the American Pacific Fleet and her battleships were the symbol of American power in the Pacific. The mighty force along battleship row had represented the old doctrine that had shaped the power projection of the early twentieth century, and its destruction symbolized the innovation in doctrine that would come to define modern warfare in the Pacific. At Clark Field in the Philippines, the United States Army Air Forces Far East was similarly destroyed on the ground after their morning patrols, just as the Egyptians would be destroyed nearly two decades later.¹⁰

Limited War with an Unlimited Outcome

The possibility of a crippling first strike by the PRC against our forward bases near the first island chain may not only bring the world into a disastrous conflict but also extremely inhibit our ability to respond. The ability for the PRC to win a limited political victory by launching an effective first strike on our bases and assets in the region could destabilize the economic and geopolitical situation across East Asia and open the possibility of communist and nationalist Chinese unification through force.

The Sino–Russian Alliance

To take in the full possibility of another Great Pacific War, we must account for the Russian ability to project joint power in the Pacific. The Russian Pacific Fleet and the many air and ground assets available to the Russian Far East is not a force to take lightly in a possible confrontation between the allies and China. The introduction of Russian Far Eastern naval and air assets may be deemed as irrelevant regarding their effectiveness against the US and its allies but would nevertheless be welcomed by Beijing in any conflict. More Russian assets from the Baltic and Northern Fleets could be expected to make the necessary journey to reinforce the North Pacific and would require additional allied assets to deny them entry or engage them. The development of this relationship also provides the Chinese and Russians with the ability to share technologies and proliferate joint capability against our forces in the region. With Russia's introduction of hypersonic missiles to some operational units, the likelihood of Chinese missiles of similar class to be introduced to the theater is high. The ability by the aggressor to effectively land a

decisive blow early in the contest is key to victory in a limited offensive. During the Cold War, it was necessary to bring massive firepower and effective fires on the enemy in the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA).¹¹ Hypersonic munitions can avoid radar, fly low and fast, and maneuver at over 20 times the speed of sound. A conventional version of these missiles may determine the outcome of a highly concentrated and lighting strike on our bases in the FEBA near the first island chain. Such a strike by these weapons would render our ability to effectively stop an aggressive move by the PRC useless and vulnerable to further fires while the allied forces are rallying from around the world to respond and counterattack. Our forces must be alert and well-dispersed to avoid heavy concentration and destruction by a surprise attack. The PRC will employ the art of *maskirovka* or deception at all levels of diplomacy, information, military, economic (DIME) in such a war plan, and we can expect Russia to be more than willing to assist its Chinese comrades in implementing this art of operational surprise.¹²

Flexible and Integrated Response

It is essential that the United States and our partners in the Indo-Pacific reorganize our joint doctrine and that the United States Air Force play a key role in implementing adaptations to fill another layer in deterrence, beyond nuclear. This deterrence stems from the ability of the United States and our allies to exercise a wide array of flexible response and dispersion capability. We must be prepared to disperse our forces to make it more difficult for a PRC war plan to strike all the necessary targets to achieve success. This would require our forces to be placed on air bases in Thailand, the Philippines, our various territories in the Pacific, and northwestern Australia. I also believe in a renovation and addition to military installations in the Marianas as well as the introduction of more mobile and elusive naval airpower.

The Carrier Problem

During World War II, the US Navy outproduced their Japanese counterparts. The fleet carriers symbolized American resolve and industrial might over the Imperial Navy's inability to compete. The fleet carrier still carries the main weight of American naval airpower projection, but this asset is well-known to be vulnerable in a possible engagement with China. According to an article in *IBD Weekly*, Gillian Rich argues, "... aircraft carriers are one of the most potent weapons in America's arsenal. But they are also more vulnerable today as new ship-killing missiles threaten to turn these \$13 billion war machines into sitting ducks."¹³ The Chinese DF-21 and DF-26 missiles have the capability of destroying the pride

of America's navy, and if one were to be sunk by a Chinese land-based missile, a deep blow to American pride and self-confidence would limit the use of carriers in the remainder of such a conflict as a liability. The destruction and loss of one of our carriers would likely trigger another response: the possible unleashing of a nuclear exchange. We must find a way to allow the carrier's air wing to participate in the delivery of standoff munitions and within range of the employment of naval airpower to the battle area on day one without risking the escalation their loss may bring to the conflict. The solution may be long-range drone tankers and the deployment of another light support asset, like smaller and more-maneuverable carriers, to offset the ease of targeting large, expensive, and highly populated national assets.

Another key aspect to mobile and effective American airpower in the World War II were the so-called "jeep carriers" or escort aircraft carriers. These were light and fast, short-deck carriers that held a small but wide array of aircraft fulfilling bomber, fighter, torpedo bomber, antisubmarine, and reconnaissance roles. This class of warship may seem useless and outdated in modern warfare; however, I would argue that it is a valid necessity to maintain a mobile and rapid response capability to support the joint fight in the event of war in the Indo-Pacific. The jeep-carrier concept would envision a new class of ship that has both defensive and offensive capabilities, while utilizing the advantage of speed and mobility. The USS *America* (LHA-5), known as the "Lightning Carrier," is a promising start to this sort of initiative.¹⁴ However, this amphibious assault ship is not solely a carrier. It also acts as a platform to launch Marines in amphibious assault craft, transport helicopters, and attack helicopters. The F-35Bs assigned to this carrier can project power for the amphibious task force; however, the ability to project air-launched standoff weapons onto the battle area from fast and mobile ships could be a decisive deterrent. The PRC's land-based missiles would need to be able to track and destroy multiple smaller targets with significant air defense and escort opposed to large task groups.

Land-Based, Long-Range Precision Strike

The US Marines are introducing their continued contribution to long-range, precision-strike capabilities to the joint fight. The service is requesting Congressional approval of land-based antiship missiles. Two types of antiship missiles are being considered, including a "venerable" version of the US Navy's Tomahawk missile and an adaptation of the Navy's stealthy strike missile.¹⁵ In a recent *National Interest* article, David Axe stated, "Now anti-ship units are the Marines' top priority, the service told the U.S. Senate in written testimony associated with the budgeting process for 2021."¹⁶ This capability will allow the United States to for-

ward deploy land-based antiship assets in theater to provide joint support to a future fight. This may also serve as an integral part of conventional deterrence by providing another capability and dispersed unit that is necessary for consideration by any PRC offensive.

The Unsinkable Aircraft Carriers Are Sinkable

The various US and allied installations in the Indo-Pacific and within range of the first island chain must be maintained at full readiness, but many potential sites across the Indo-Pacific must be thoroughly analyzed and constructed to meet the need for a rapid introduction of forces with the ability to generate an immediate capability to launch and recover aircraft. The current installations are vulnerable and within striking range from Chinese, North Korean, and Russian standoff weapons.¹⁷ These islands may serve as “unsinkable aircraft carriers;” however, it is vital that they maintain a dense array of air defense capability. The US Army Air Defense Artillery as well as Marine and Air Force security troops should be given full capability to provide adequate antimissile and antiair batteries on these installations. Some examples of antiaircraft artillery we must update and deploy in larger numbers are the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and the Counter Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar (C-RAM) systems. The same must be considered for the airstrips and installations on other US possessions and allied territories to implement a credible dispersal and retaliatory capability. These island airfields are vital, but if they are not numerous and well-defended, they can be made ineffective to respond to a short and limited PRC thrust.

Dispersion and Mutual Support

Of course, various numbers of well-dispersed allied aircraft responding to any crisis within the first island chain would also support these naval forces. Just as the Israelis perfected the art of ground crew turn around rates, the USAF ground crews will have to perform as quickly and efficiently to obtain the maximum number of sorties. The allied aircraft, well-dispersed, must reintroduce a high level of quick reaction alert (QRA) standards. This will be key within the B-52, B-1, B-2, and future B-21 communities, along with other long-range standoff delivery platforms. I suggest that the strategic bomber force in the Indo-Pacific maintain well-dispersed and alert crews that are not easy money for a Chinese missile strike on Guam. I propose they be spread to multiple locations with multiple crews on standby alert. I also propose that we increase the numbers of standoff weapons delivery platforms in the area to increase our response capabilities. All these measures play into a role of deterrence. According to Diana

Stacy Correll, "Although the move signifies the close of a 16-year mission as part of the Continuous Bomber Presence mission, the change doesn't mean strategic bombers won't operate in the Indo-Pacific anymore, the Air Force said." According to the article, Air Force Global Strike Command put out the following statement, "U.S. strategic bombers will continue to operate in the Indo-Pacific, to include Guam, at the timing and tempo of our choosing."¹⁸ The removal of the continuous bomber presence in Guam presents Beijing with a new degree of uncertainty. The United States does not have all its eggs in the same basket in the Pacific, and this decision allows the US bomber force to exercise a more flexible and unpredictable response to any contingency. Any war plan constructed by the PRC would now have to adapt to a new reality. The American B-52s and B-1Bs will no longer be relied on to have a large percentage of their available assets on one island, within range of Chinese missiles.

It must be made clear in the minds of the Chinese Politburo that territorial expansion, even limited, would be too costly and too uncertain to execute. This method must work in conjunction with the alliance and other branches to create a credible, flexible, and assured conventional response capability.

The South Atlantic Example

In April 1982, Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) launched a bombing raid against the Argentine-occupied Stanley Airport in the Falkland Islands under the operational code name, "Black Buck." The Falklands War is an excellent case study to illustrate the importance of land-based airpower having the proper training to conduct antishipping operations. The Argentine Air Force's ability to launch air strikes from Stanley Airport against the British Task Force and their carriers would present the possibility of Argentine fighter bombers to threaten the Royal Navy's carriers, which comprised the only air component of the task force. The small number of Harrier fighters provided the sole fixed-wing air cover for the task force against a significantly larger Argentine Air Force and Naval Air Arm of attack and fighter aircraft.¹⁹ The RAF's elderly Vulcans, remnants of the once formidable "V-Force," prepared for a bombing raid that would render Stanley Airport useless to the Argentinians and would force the Argentine strikers to take off from air bases in Argentina to strike targets against the British task force. A significant number of Royal Navy ships were sunk or damaged by the end of the conflict, but the lack of antiship training and the loss of Stanley Airport as a usable forward base allowed the British to establish a beachhead at San Carlos and eventually clear the skies of Argentine aircraft. The stunning performance by the Israeli trained, Argentine pilots displayed to the Royal Navy that, despite their technology and history, they remained vulnerable to highly motivated and daring

aircrews.²⁰ The success of Operation Black Buck illustrates the importance of air defense and airstrip multiplicity in one's area of operations. It would have been significantly more difficult for the RAF Vulcan force, in 1982, to mount long-range bombing raids against multiple airbases from their base at Ascension Island. It is essential to note that the Stanley Airport was not the only operable airfield in the Falklands, but at other sites the Argentinians had only placed Pucara light tac-prop ground attack aircraft, providing no ability to project the much-needed strike capabilities to interdict the British carrier force and her escorts. The complexities of air, naval, and amphibious engagements in the South Atlantic may provide many lessons to be applied in the first island chain of the Western Pacific.

Chinese Marines

According to Capt Michael A. Hanson, USMC, "While the Chinese state has approved the reduction of its army by 300,000 soldiers, it plans to grow its marine corps by 400 percent, from 20,000 marines to more than 100,000 and the People's Liberation Army amphibious units will be folded into the PLANMC [People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps]." ²¹ This is a significant increase in amphibious assault capability and may signal Beijing's future strategic intentions that involve the use of these units to exercise operations well beyond the borders of mainland China. From an air domain perspective, amphibious assaults are extremely difficult and complex operations and to do them successfully requires much preparation and logistical coordination. Controlling the air during an amphibious landing is vital to the operation's success, and the Falklands War of 1982 is a prime example as to what a lack of air superiority can do to any landing force and its escorts. US land-based and naval air assets must retain and modernize their capabilities to conduct joint anti-amphibious air operations to deter such a build-up and ensure in the minds of the aggressor that an amphibious assault will be heavily contested at the water's edge by long-range precision strike against landing and logistics shipping. A key to signal an increase in PRC offensive strategic intentions will be shown through their expanded shipbuilding of vessels that provide an amphibious capability, and a joint angle the air must deter China's use of such assets in the Western Pacific and beyond.

Release the Gremlins

Another addition to an active defense of the Pacific would introduce the "Gremlin." In the article "DARPA's Semi-Disposable Gremlin Drones Will Fly by 2019," Evan Ackerman describes the new drone as "nearly disposable UAVs [unmanned

aerial vehicles] that could launch and be retrieved from flying aircraft carrier mother-ships in mid-air.”²² Dynetics, the drone’s manufacturer, describes their concept:

The Dynetics solution involves deploying a towed, stabilized capture device below and away from the C-130. The air vehicle docks with the device much like an airborne refueling operation. Once docked and powered off, the air vehicle is raised to the C-130, where it is mechanically secured and stowed. The key technologies can be straightforwardly adapted to allow under-wing recovery and bay recovery by other cargo aircraft.²³

This new capability for the C-130 can significantly shift US allies’ abilities to respond rapidly against any PRC initiation of hostilities. C-130 squadrons on QRA and a light undisclosed number on routine airborne alert can provide another conventional deterrent that can swarm the battle area and could target any amphibious or air forces that are used in an offensive within the first island chain. The Gremlins could serve as another uncertain threat in the minds of PRC war planners and provide an excellent platform to seek out and destroy Chinese amphibious groups. These drones would not only act as a strike capability but could also serve as escorts to the C-130s that are tasked with delivering them as well as any other allied aircraft called upon to respond.

Indian and Allied Cooperation

Recent border clashes between PLA and Indian forces along the disputed Sino-Indian border in the Galwan Valley have resulted in the deaths of several soldiers on both sides and much speculation as to future developments in the region. This is not the first border clash between the two nuclear-armed powers in the region and may serve as an opportunity to solidify the US-Indian relationship regarding PRC aggression in the Indo-Pacific. The recent border clash could motivate further cooperation and joint planning between US, allied, and Indian air and naval forces in the region and can provide the PRC with yet another factor to consider when planning or conducting future offensive operations in the region. The addition of Indian naval and air strength as well as cooperative bases could prove to be another headache for any war planners in Beijing.²⁴ Although the Indian relationship with Russia as an arms supplier could prove difficult in any relationship-building efforts with Washington, India’s recent arms procurements from the United States may prove to open the door to many possibilities for cooperation to counter the PRC. For example, it was recently reported that “India’s cabinet cleared \$2.6 billion purchase from Lockheed Martin Corp. of 24 multi-role MH-60R Seahawk maritime helicopters to Indian navy. The State Department has also approved a potential sale to India of \$1.8 billion in arms, including

air-defense radars and missiles, rifles and other equipment, the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency announced.”²⁵ The Indian Air Force will also be receiving AH-64 Apache attack helicopters as a result of the deal.²⁶ The introduction of American military equipment into the Indian armed forces may prove to shift a future balance in the region regarding Russian supply and cooperation. The door to a stronger partnership of likeminded and democratic nations may provide the Indo-Pacific with a stronger web of alliances that will create problems for any Chinese first strike in the Western Pacific.

Too Fast and Too Costly to Respond

The ability for the allies to respond with maximum flights of combat aircraft and standoff munitions will be vital to the outcome of any PRC offensive. The PRC will have a key advantage with its short lines of supply and operational initiative. Any allied doctrine in the Indo-Pacific will be defensive in nature but also must be able to take the offensive to liberate any territory a PRC amphibious force may attempt to seize. This conventional avenue of deterrence is just as important as the nuclear element. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the United States and the NATO alliance took a hard look at their war gaming scenarios and projections in Central Europe.²⁷ The Egyptian and Syrian thrusts against the Israelis in the Golan Heights and Sinai proved that a limited war in West Germany by the Warsaw Pact would be too quick and costly for the reserves to respond. The concept of active defense and eventually the evolution of AirLand Battle took root to provide a counter to the growing Soviet military capabilities.²⁸ With the introduction of this new doctrine we saw a shift in the minds of Soviet leadership. By the late 1980s, it was well-understood that any conventional Soviet attack would be too costly and too uncertain due to allied superiority in both technology and doctrine. The Western alliance had learned the lessons it could not afford to in a time that tactically favored the Soviets.

Thucydides Trap and COVID-19

Cui bono? Does China benefit from the corona virus, and does its military readiness and response to the pandemic indicate any long-term game plan? Can this game plan encompass a short jab at taking air and sea control of South China Sea while Beijing’s adversaries rally to confront the current health and economic crisis? Richard Javad Heydarian of the *Asia Times* points out a significant increase in Chinese activity as a result of the outbreak: “While some see China’s nationalistic messaging as a bid to rally its people during difficult Covid-19 times, others

view the increasingly aggressive naval maneuvers as a bid to exploit America's weakened condition to secure new advantage in the hot spot theater.”²⁹

COVID-19 presents an opportunity to take advantage of the global economic and health crisis and political division within the United States during a critical election year. Military exercises in the South China Sea and mock drills planned to simulate an invasion of Taiwan suggest an increase in PRC readiness. According to the *Reuters*, “The Chinese military is planning to conduct a large-scale landing drill off Hainan Island in the South China Sea in August to simulate the possible seizure of the Taiwanese-held Pratas Island in the future, Chinese sources familiar with the matter have said.”³⁰ With the introduction of a second fleet carrier, the Chinese will be able to exercise joint air, naval, and amphibious capabilities on a large scale relatively close to the area of operations. Many planned military operations have developed from “training” or “exercises” and can quickly develop into a real-world attempt to seize these islands by force during these turbulent times—with little immediate reaction possible from the allied powers in the region. With the *Shandong* and *Liaoning* carriers able to combine with other surface assets, comprising their own air groups, along with land-based assets providing cover, the ability for the United States to respond effectively would be a difficult feat.³¹

In the media, the American public has seen firsthand what the virus can do to military readiness. Recently, the outbreak on board American naval assets created much consternation within domestic politics and fostered negative perceptions, at times false, but nonetheless damaging to the confidence in American ability to react in the Western Pacific. According to Brookings, “The naval services have been particularly careful not to let sailors and Marines get to sea if sick, since as we all know, ships are the perfect petri dishes for the virus’s spread. Not all of these measures can be sustained indefinitely. The armed forces will face an increasingly challenging path forward through the rest of the calendar year and into 2021.”³² In particular, the focus of the spread of the virus within the fleet has been our aircraft carriers. The USS *Theodore Roosevelt* has seen much media coverage due to its outbreak on board and the relieving of its captain due to a breach in the chain of command concerning the safety of the crew. The perception that this coverage creates in the eyes of the PRC can generate miscalculation when planning for future operations in the Western Pacific. The danger that these stories create is a possibility to take advantage of a “quarantined fleet.” The PRC, regardless of if its own readiness or problems with the virus, can regulate its media coverage to conceal and restrain information from getting out to possible adversaries.

The introduction of the virus into the global commons, regardless of the intent or lack thereof by the PRC, has created an opportunity for China to expand its influence. Such expansion may take the form of economic growth or an increase

in political reliability on the world stage compared to a perception of division within the United States over race relations and public health crises. Putting politics aside, the military situation in the Western Pacific is at a crucial crossroads within the Thucydides' Trap theory. Doors to conflict must open for the trap to be sprung, and a global pandemic combined with a domestic identity crisis at home may provide the PRC with the chance, in its leaders' minds, to take advantage of a miscalculated opportunity to begin exercising regional dominance that can lead to escalation and military confrontation.

Unfulfilling the Prophecy

In a modern sense, we cannot afford to learn a doctrinal lesson ourselves; in fact, I would propose we avoid having an ally or proxy learn a necessity to change as well. We must skip the learning process and find a new balance through containment and overwhelming preparedness to respond in theater. The nuclear umbrella, although necessary, does not fully deter a limited and conventional engagement. The US Air Force will play a defining role in a future conflict in the Western Pacific, and our ability to adapt to rapid response and antishipping with a new level of air and naval cooperation will determine the outcome. My greatest fear is that we may find ourselves in a similar situation to the British Empire during the Suez Crisis of 1956. We may wake up one day and find that we are not as capable as we had thought and that we significantly overestimated our position in the world. The combination of fear and pride creates the necessary ingredients for a war that neither side wants, but a third party may draw both sides beyond the brink into an unavoidable collision course.³³ Therefore, deterrence through strength, multiplicity, and a wide range of retaliatory long-range, precision-strike capabilities are less likely to spring the Thucydides' Trap prophecy. ☸

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Notes

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